STORY BY
SYOUGO KINUGASA
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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL
6

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL 6

HASEBE HARUKA
A Class D girl. Like Miyake, she's shy and a member of the self-proclaimed "loners club." She has a habit of giving people nicknames right off the bat.
YUKIMURA KEISEI
A Class D boy with stellar academic skills. Though prickly at first, he's come into his own and is trying to contribute to the class.
MIYAKE AKITO
A quiet boy from Class D who hardly ever speaks to anyone. He's in the archery club.
"With me tutoring you, you'll definitely score higher than you did on the midterm."
"I'm speaking with Ayanokouji-kun."
"I finally got a break from club stuff, but I don't want to spend all my free time studying. Can I head back after I finish?"
"You're giving me far too much credit, Horikita-san."
Ichinose looked straight ahead as she spoke. Her eyes began to water as she answered me.

Sakura was incredibly nervous, her face turning a deep shade of red. She was so flustered that she didn't notice that her glasses were crooked.
"I-I also want to join Ayanokouji-kun's group!"

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL 6

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7. A DIFFERENCE IN DETERMINATION

POSTSCRIPT

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NOVEL 6

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku

Seven Seas Entertainment

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE VOL. 6

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Art by Tomoseshunsaku

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Chapter 1:
Kushida Kikyou's Soliloquy

Do people live according to their own ideals, I wonder? Well, I do. I've become my ideal self. Other girls acknowledge that I've been blessed with a wonderful figure, my memory is sharper than most people's, and I'm academically gifted. I'm good at sports and confident in my conversational skills. I have pawns at my disposal, I'm shrewd, and I'm adaptable to any situation.

Wouldn't you say I'm perfect?

Of course, I wouldn't say that I am. There are girls cuter than me, and many who are smarter or more athletic. That's obvious. Yes, that's quite obvious. However, it's also fair to say that most people hate to lose. Whether it be a question of looks, academic performance, singing, or even video games, it's only natural to feel frustrated when you lose to someone else at something you excel at.

I hate losing far more than the average person does.

Every time I lose to someone I know, it shakes me to my core. Every loss deepens the darkness inside my heart. I once vomited from the intense emotional stress that losing caused me.

Reality is cruel. I know I'm not average, but I'm not a genius, either. When I was a child, people fawned over me every time I completed even a small task. They called me a genius, a *wunderkind*. It felt wonderful. It made my heart dance.

I was the best at everything—until I started junior high. Then people began to overtake me in multiple aspects. I just couldn't beat certain opponents, and that ate at me, so I searched for an escape. I wanted something that I could never lose at. I wanted people to respect and envy me.

I couldn't achieve that in academics or sports. So, I decided I'd get people to trust me instead. They'd love me more than anyone else. I would extend my hand in friendship to disgusting, asocial boys, and to girls unattractive and bitter enough to turn anyone's stomach.
I suppressed my real emotions and wore a smile, exuding false kindness.

I became really popular. I was loved by my classmates, by both upperclassmen and underclassmen, by my teachers and guardians, even by strangers. When it came to likeability, I was unparalleled.

Trustworthy people receive access to secrets. When people find someone they can truly trust, they lay themselves bare. I racked up that currency. I learned everything from the secret desires of the most popular boy in class to the smartest kid's secret troubles. I obtained information both insignificant and gravely serious.

Every time someone confided in me, my heart danced with joy.

Every time someone trusted me with information that meant the world to them, I shook with delight. I was trusted—the most trustworthy person around. That became my reason for being. But my power came from living a life of lies. I spent my days being slowly crushed by the weight of that stress.

Then…that incident happened. Well, that's not quite true. The incident didn't "happen." Someone *made* it happen.

But there was nothing I could have done, anyway. Everyone had rejected me by then.

If you hurt someone, you can't complain when they hurt you back. If someone hurts you, you pay them back in kind. That's only natural, right?

Still, the ideal persona I'd constructed for myself shattered. The respect and envy people felt for me disappeared, replaced by fear and hate.

That wasn't what I wanted.

I only wanted one thing.

I wanted to be everyone's favorite. To feel that sense of superiority once more.

I promised myself I'd never go through that again. I swore to myself that it wouldn't happen. As I thought about my new life in high school, my heart pounded in excitement.

This time, I would succeed.

But the beginning of my new life turned out to be a disaster. On the first day of high school, I bumped into Horikita Suzune on the bus.

She knew about the incident.

As long as she was here, I'd never have peace.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Yukimura Teruhiko
CLASS:	First Year, Class D
STUDENT ID:	S01T004708
DATE OF BIRTH:	July 11th

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	A
INTELLIGENCE:	A–
DECISION MAKING:	C
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	D–
COOPERATIVENESS:	D–

Although he achieved excellent results in both the interview and written exam, his poor social skills mean he doesn't have any friends. He doesn't engage in clubs or volunteer activities, either, and he tends to judge others on their academic achievements alone. We expect to see improvement in this area.

His classwork is excellent. However, he hasn't progressed with making friends. I will continue to keep an eye on him.

Chapter 2:
The Changing Class D

The sports festival was over.

It was mid-October, and getting chilly outside. The student council held an election, complete with a ceremony to honor the outgoing members and swear in the new ones afterward. That event was significant, with the entire student body assembled in the gymnasium, but most first-year students couldn't have cared less. They nearly fell asleep during the ceremony, quieting their breathing so that the teachers and upperclassmen wouldn't notice them.

"President Horikita has some final remarks he'd like to share with you all."

The moderator stood aside as Horikita Manabu slowly took the stage and approached the microphone. Once, the younger Horikita would have shrunk back in fear at the sight of her brother. Now, she remained steadfast as she watched him leave his position so that the new president could be sworn in.

"I'm very proud to have led the student council for nearly two years. I'm also quite grateful. Thank you all very much," Horikita's older brother said to the crowd. His address was brief and unemotional, delivered with the air of a solemn obligation, and he retreated to his original position once it was done.

The ceremony didn't end there. The other student council officers remained on the stage. "President Horikita, thank you for all your hard work. Now then, we'd like to welcome Nagumo Miyabi, a second-year Class A and the next student council president, to say a few words."

Nagumo walked onstage and stood in front of the microphone. Ichinose, a first year, was among the student council members who watched him attentively.

"Hello. I'm Nagumo, second-year Class A. Student Council President Horikita, I sincerely appreciate the strict yet kind guidance you've shown me. I'd like to express my respect for you, while also emphasizing what an honor it's been to serve alongside the most

capable president in this school's history. You've exhibited the strongest leadership possible."

Nagumo bowed his head deeply toward Horikita's brother. Then he faced the student body once more.

"Allow me to introduce myself again. My name is Nagumo Miyabi, and I will be assuming the position of student council president at the Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing High School. I sincerely look forward to working with all of you."

Nagumo had behaved enigmatically during the sports festival. Now, he was the picture of politeness. However, that courtesy didn't last long. He donned a small, thin smile, and the atmosphere changed almost immediately.

"This may be sudden, but for my first order of business, I pledge to change the term length for student council members, as well as the general election method. The previous student council president held the general election in October instead of December each year. This arrangement, which saw the next generation of leaders move into their roles early, yielded mixed results. Therefore, the new student council has determined that it's time to take things a step further. From now on, the student council president and officers will have indefinite terms while attending school, so that they may serve continuously until graduation. At the same time, we'll annul both the current general-election system, and any restrictions on the student council's size. The council will constantly accept new officers. In other words, an excellent candidate may join the student council no matter how many people are currently on it. Also, if someone is determined to be unfit for office, they can be removed by a majority vote. Please allow me to confirm this to all students, teachers, and student council members who served under the previous president. To bring this school into the future, I intend to thoroughly destroy the past."

Nagumo spoke forcefully, as if he meant his remarks to deny the achievements of the previous student council president, who still stood right behind him.

"I wanted to implement these changes at once. Unfortunately, a newly elected president must deal with many obligations and restrictions first." Nagumo glanced at Horikita, then immediately turned back to the student body. "A revolution is coming. Students with real ability will rise to the top, and students without any will fall. I intend to

turn this school into a true meritocracy, so please, give me everything you've got. I look forward to seeing what you can do."

The entire gymnasium had been silent during his announcement, but as soon as he finished speaking, almost every second-year student shouted with sheer delight. Apparently, there was some kind of tension between the second and third-year students that we first years didn't know about.

2.1

The second semester continued.

My surroundings changed bit by bit. Class D had made it through major events like the uninhabited island and the sports festival, and slowly but surely, we were coming together as a class. People's friend circles gradually expanded, and they began to show marked academic improvement.

Even our problem child, Sudou, was changing for the better. Before the sports festival, he'd slept through class as if it were no big deal. Now, he actually took notes, probably because Horikita checked in on him after. He still got sleepy on occasion, but that was probably because he put in intense practice for the basketball club. He also softened his rough treatment of Ike and Yamauchi.

Sudou was maturing, and people's opinions of him began to improve. However, he wasn't the only one changing. I saw it in myself, too.

Whether that was a good or bad thing remained to be seen.

"Are you by yourself?" someone asked, pulling me from my musings.

"Is it bad to be by myself?" I asked.

Horikita appeared to chuckle at me. "Your dear friends Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun haven't been inviting you out much. Isn't that right?"

Ike and Yamauchi had left the classroom with the Professor in tow, heading toward Keyaki Mall. I thought I'd maintained a Buddha-like calm, but Horikita apparently saw through me. Yeah. After the sports festival, my two closest friends had invited me to hang out much less often. Actually, it was more like they'd completely cut me out.

"It's hardly surprising," Horikita said. "They used to think that all of you were in the same terrible-student boat. Then they discovered that you were actually hiding remarkable physical ability."

"What remarkable physical ability? I'm kind of fast on my feet,

that's all."

"Very fast, especially for a student. Besides, they probably noticed that you scored much higher than average when you measured your grip strength. You understand, don't you? People tend to fundamentally resent those who excel. In your case, though, they resent you because you concealed your excellence." Horikita sighed. "Well, enjoy your life of solitude."

With that sarcastic remark, she left, her long hair swaying as she exited the classroom. Even though she was usually all alone, too, her dignified conduct was worth at least a little respect.

As Horikita left, Karuizawa cast a strange look in my direction. However, as our gazes met, she moved her eyes away again. There was clearly some meaning in the look, but she followed it by getting up and leaving right behind Horikita.

Karuizawa's short, fluttering skirt caught my attention. It was a little shorter than the other students' skirts. In cases like those, one or two centimeters made all the difference in the world.

"What's she…? Well, whatever," I muttered to myself.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun."

I didn't know Satou's first name. She was the same kind of fashionable *gyaru* as Karuizawa. She got along with Ike and Yamauchi, but she and I hardly ever talked. It seemed as though Satou wanted the kind of social clout Kushida had, but she wasn't all that popular with the guys, though Ike described her as "the sort of girl who's used to being around guys."

Right now, Satou seemed to have been waiting to get me alone. She glanced around the room as if anxious.

"Do you need something?" I asked. I didn't know what else to say.

"Uh, yeah. Several things, I guess." She evaded the question. I couldn't guess what she was getting at. "Well, it's like this. Can I borrow you for a bit? I want to talk."

This was strange. I steeled myself and put up my guard. It was easier to summon up the courage to accept her request than to summon up the courage to turn her down.

"Well, it's just…" Satou began. "Is it okay to do this somewhere else?" Before I could answer, though, she got up and walked out of the

classroom.

I followed her.

Just as I left, Sakura made a sound, as if she wanted to say something. “Ah…” However, no words came out of her mouth. She didn’t follow me, either.

Satou and I went into the passage that led to the gymnasium. It would probably be crowded after lunch, but since everyone was off eating right now, it was an ideal place to talk. She clearly didn’t want anyone else to witness this.

Satou stopped in her tracks and looked over her shoulder. “I’m going to ask you something odd… Ayanokouji-kun, are you going out with anyone?”

“Uhh, what do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean exactly what it sounds like. I’m asking you if you have a girlfriend. Do you?”

The answer was “no.” Though saying as much would reveal just how unpopular I was, I couldn’t exactly lie. “I don’t.”

“Hmm. I see. Well, does that mean you’re looking for a girlfriend right now?”

She didn’t ask it like she was making fun of me, or inquiring out of pity. Actually, she had a small smile, as if she was happy. I started to understand where our conversation was headed. Was this a trap? I looked around, but saw no sign of anyone watching.

Why the sudden interest in me? Maybe this had something to do with what Horikita meant when she said I was fast?

“If you’re okay with starting out as friends, then… Well, how about we exchange phone numbers?” Satou asked.

This was… Well, it was halfway to a romantic confession. I had never imagined I would receive a proposal like this from a girl, but I couldn't really come up with a reason to refuse.

"All right," I said. "Sure."

"Okay. Got it." Once I entered Satou into my contacts, the words "registration complete" displayed on my phone screen. Having more girls in my contacts was amazing. After I put Satou's number in my phone, there was a strange feeling of tranquility in the air.

"This might be kind of blunt, but why did you suddenly want my contact info?" I asked.

Satou blushed and averted her eyes. "Why? Well, it's just…the sports festival, the relay. I guess you looked so incredibly cool, Ayanokouji-kun. Or I guess it's that I just never noticed you before now…like you were completely off my radar. I thought the best guy in class was, you know, Hirata-kun. But since he's Karuizawa-san's boyfriend, there's nothing I can do about that, right?"

Satou looked back up at me, seeming almost panicked.

"Uh, I'm not saying I think you're worse than Hirata-kun or anything like that, Ayanokouji-kun. To be honest, after getting a good look at you, you're even cooler than Hirata-kun, and more mature and gentler, too. S-so, anyway, that's…"

I didn't hear the end of her sentence, since she chose that time to turn and run like the wind. I stood completely still, unable to wrap my head around what had just happened.

I'd received a romantic confession from an unexpected person, at an unexpected time, in an unexpected place. No one can see the future, it's true, but I could never have imagined this. What was I even supposed to do? I didn't feel anything for Satou, good or bad. In fact, I saw her only as a classmate, nothing more. So, should I have turned her down?

Then again, Satou hadn't said that she wanted to go out with me or that she liked me. All she did was ask whether I had a girlfriend, and if we could exchange phone numbers. She'd added that she wanted to "start out as friends." If I turned her down, she could just say I misunderstood her. That would be embarrassing.

It was one thing to observe romance as a bystander, but it was

weird to be confessed to. Now I understood how Sakura had felt back when Yamauchi said that he liked her.

As I made my way back to the building, conflicted, I bumped into Katsuragi and Yahiko from Class A. I planned to just walk by, but Katsuragi stopped in his tracks and said to Yahiko, “Sorry, but you go on ahead. I have a little something to discuss with Ayanokouji.”

Yahiko immediately nodded and agreed to Katsuragi’s orders.

“Horikita isn’t with you,” Katsuragi said.

“It’s not like we’re joined at the hip,” I replied. Talking to other guys was much easier than talking to girls. I felt like an idiot for struggling so hard to make friends.

“I suppose that’s true. I just wanted to say that I was surprised by your performance in the sports festival’s final relay. I doubt anyone could’ve expected it,” he said.

“Class D won’t always be the losers,” I said.

“Perhaps. But most of your own classmates looked shocked, too. Unless everyone in your class is a talented actor, it appears that few of them knew how fast you are.”

In the midst of all that chaos, Katsuragi had observed me closely. He was conscientious like that.

“Imagine whatever you like,” I told him.

“No matter. I didn’t think I’d get anything more from you.”

“You thought you’d only get a little bit of information from the enemy? Or are you saying Class A will never see Class D as a threat?” I asked.

Katsuragi looked slightly troubled. “I have enough problems right now. I simply can’t afford to focus on other classes,” he said.

“You told Horikita to be wary of Ryuuen, though.”

“He’ll do anything for the sake of winning. Even if that means resorting to blackmail or violence.”

Ryuuen wasn’t the only person Katsuragi feared. He also had to be on his guard around Sakayanagi Arisu, another Class A power player, but I wasn’t going to bring that up. Sakayanagi was a mysterious student who knew me. If I stirred the pot, it might not end well for me.

“Blackmail and violence, huh? Sounds like Ryuuen would be in trouble if the school found out.”

“He’s a clever person,” Katsuragi replied. “Please warn Horikita not to underestimate him. I understand why you may not trust me, but Ryuuen is everyone’s enemy.”

Yes, but there was evidence that Katsuragi teamed up with Ryuuen at one point. I *wasn’t* sure whether I could trust Katsuragi, and he seemed to sense my feelings. “You don’t believe me?”

I decided to probe further. “To be honest, I’m not sure I do. I can’t tell you my source, but there are rumors that you worked with Ryuuen. Is that wrong?”

“Where did you hear that? Well, I suppose that doesn’t matter. I regret it. Even though I felt that I had no other options at the time, I should never have gotten involved with Ryuuen. That’s precisely why I’m warning you.” Katsuragi’s words were persuasive. “I should’ve known the risks of teaming up with him.”

“So, you want to join forces against Ryuuen?” I asked.

Katsuragi quietly chuckled to himself. He seemed tense, so I asked something else.

“I understand that you’re wary of Ryuuen, but isn’t that mainly Class A and Class B’s problem? I saw the class point totals back in October,” I told him.

Katsuragi pursed his lips. After the uninhabited-island test, Class A saw their points increase to 1,124. However, their points fell during the special exam on the cruise ship. After the sports festival, they were down to 874. Class B was closing in on them with 753 points. Plus, Class C was sitting at 542 points. Class D had 262 points.

“I admit we’re in a bad situation. I didn’t understand how the school was structured, and my inability to grasp the point system didn’t help,” he replied.

He was right. The point system was a problem. It appeared simple at first, but there were strangely unclear layers to how it functioned. The school was particularly tough on absences, tardiness, and poor class behavior; Class D had been hit hard by that. In one month, our class lost all the points we’d started out with. The memory still haunted me. Students now took class more seriously, but I doubted the penalties

were all completely gone.

“This is unlike any high school I ever imagined.” Katsuragi crossed his arms, looking dissatisfied. “The school operates on a mysterious, incomprehensible system. Students in the same grade should get along, not be hostile toward each another.”

The school thrived on competition, without a doubt. The animosity between classes could increase the cohesion *within* a class, but, well, only Class B seemed peaceful right now. Several students in Class D chipped away at our sense of unity, and Class C was a dictatorship. Then there was Class A, currently divided between two factions locked in a power struggle.

“Aren’t you concerned, Ayanokouji?”

“Honestly, no. This school is fascinating. With a certain degree of hard work, we don’t need to worry about necessities like food, clothing, and shelter, and we can use our points to enjoy ourselves. The facilities provided are all more than satisfactory, so I have no complaints,” I answered.

“I agree. If anything, the environment they provided us is *too* perfect. I can’t imagine that it’s good to treat teenagers like this. Anyway, to return to the point, please warn Horikita about Ryuuen.”

I promised I’d tell her. Ryuuen was certainly Class D’s enemy.

“Guess you just want to live in peace, too? Our problems never end,” I muttered.

2.2

That night, Karuizawa called me while I hung out in my room. She got right to the point. “I have something to ask you.”

“If I can answer it, then sure.”

“Satou-san confessed her feelings to you, didn’t she?”

That blindsided me. How did Karuizawa know?

“A lot of girls in class already know.”

“Good lord. Teenage girls are faster than the internet. Who’s your source?” I asked.

“What do you mean, ‘who’? Satou-san herself. She told me in advance that she was going to confess to you,” Karuizawa replied.

Was this like insider trading or something? “Is that why you looked over at me this afternoon?”

“You noticed?”

“It shouldn’t matter who confesses to whom. Why pay attention to that kind of thing?” I asked.

“Because that’s just how girls are.”

Was this kind of like wanting to write your name on your possessions? Guys did similar things, if not in exactly the same ways. Even so, this didn’t make sense.

“It’s not a competition,” I said. “Why do you care if someone makes a declaration?”

“People will be super turned off if you suddenly proclaim that you’re going out with someone. It’ll make you look really pathetic. Anyway, I don’t care about that. It’s…whatever. What I want right now is your answer,” she replied.

As if this wasn’t nerve-racking enough already. “My answer to her has nothing to do with you.”

“Well, I guess that’s true. But it’s not like it isn’t my business at all, right? I mean, you threatened me. You made me do all kinds of

things for you. The girls' information network is pretty wide, and I don't want lots of rumors floating around. Every time I get myself involved in something for you, it puts me at risk. Understand?"

In other words, Karuizawa wanted to make sure I wouldn't tell Satou anything about her if Satou and I started dating. Or maybe she was afraid that I'd stop protecting her if I only cared about Satou? It was clearly eating at her, but I was still missing something. Karuizawa was a logical person, but she was pushing too hard this time.

"Well, you don't need to worry about it," I said.

"Does that mean you're thinking about going out with her?"

"I didn't say that."

"You are, though. You didn't say that you were turning her down. Ew! I can see right through you. You're happy Satou confessed to you, because now you're just going to go dream up some naughty, perverted stuff. Guys are so gross," she said.

This was nuts. Karuizawa was like a parent raving about their kid becoming an Olympic athlete one day just because they started crawling early. "Well, even if guys are perverts, I don't have any feelings for Satou," I replied.

"Okay then. Prove it. What's your reason for refusing her?" she asked.

"Prove *what*? She didn't even confess her feelings to me. She just said she wanted to start out as friends, and we exchanged phone numbers."

"I see. So, it was like that."

Why did I have to talk to Karuizawa about this stuff? "I didn't need to respond to a confession. It just ended with us exchanging contact information."

"Hmm. Well, I suppose we can leave things at that for today," she said.

Karuizawa was acting like a condescending spymaster. Since I had her on the phone right now anyway, I decided to confirm something. "Manabe and those other Class C girls haven't tried anything with you since we were on the cruise ship, have they?"

"No. It's okay, at least for now." Karuizawa's voice got low. She

didn't want to think about that incident.

"I've taken countermeasures, but in the event something does happen, let me know right away. I'll make sure it's resolved," I told her.

I heard Karuizawa hold her breath over the phone. Had I been too bold?

"I see. I know that if I'm not useful to you, it'll be bad for me," she replied.

To survive at this school, Karuizawa needed to keep her current social standing. To do that, she had to conceal the truth of her past. Manabe and her friends didn't really know that truth. The problem was Ryuuen pulling the strings from behind the scenes. I might have to confront him at some point, and that time was most likely nigh.

"Anyway, back to our earlier topic. What do you plan to do about Satou-san? Since you exchanged contact information, it's possible things could move to the next level, right?" asked Karuizawa.

"I'm putting things on hold. I mean, I don't know Satou. She may not even call."

"So, if Satou-san pursues you or tries to cling to you, you'll dump her?"

"What do you mean, 'dump'? All we did was exchange numbers. It's not like I'm going to go call her myself." I didn't have the guts to just ask Satou out on a date, or to make a romantic confession.

"I suppose." Karuizawa seemed mollified.

"Karuizawa."

"What?"

"Make sure to erase records of our calls from your phone."

"Yeah, I've already been doing that. Emails, too."

"Just as expected." Karuizawa knew how to handle herself.

"If that's all, I'm going to hang up," she said.

"Sure." With that, the call ended.

To be honest, I wanted to say one more thing, but decided not to. Talking about what was to come would just put pressure on Karuizawa, anyway.

I didn't want to tell her about the potential danger we faced. Not

yet.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Satou Maya
CLASS:	First Year, Class D
STUDENT ID:	S01T004739
DATE OF BIRTH:	February 28th

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	D–
INTELLIGENCE:	D–
DECISION MAKING:	D–
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	C
COOPERATIVENESS:	C–

She was diligent and earnest in elementary school and earned relatively high grades. In junior high, she started focusing on goofing off with friends, and she was noticeably absentminded for most of her first and second year. Although her behavior improved in her third year, her current academic performance can only be described as sluggish. We hope that she continues to develop her cheerful attitude and proactive nature, and that she strives to improve her abilities.

She gets along with everyone, boys and girls alike. I'd like her to make some good friends.

Chapter 3:
The Paper Shuffle

A few days later, our class's atmosphere was heavy. The feeling wasn't disappointment so much as nervousness. Class D's homeroom teacher, Chabashira-sensei, appeared to sense it.

"Take your seats. It seems you prepared quite a bit in advance for this," she remarked.

The moment Chabashira-sensei walked in, everyone went quiet and a bit stiff. We should've behaved like that originally. It was the natural way for a class to be, but Chabashira-sensei didn't hide her surprise at our mature conduct.

"My, my. You all look so serious. It's hard to imagine you're Class D."

"It's because today's the day you announce the midterm results, right?" Ike looked slightly nervous.

Chabashira-sensei grinned in response.

"That's exactly right. The school will expel you immediately if you fail the midterm or final exam. I told you as much before, so I imagine it's fresh in your memory. I'm happy to see that you've matured, but results are results. If you received a failing grade, you'll need to prepare for the consequences. So, without further ado, I'll now post the results. Read them carefully."

Her warning was genuine. The classroom's surveillance cameras always had their lenses trained on the students, observing everything. If someone acted out after seeing their test scores, the school would undoubtedly respond with draconian measures.

"So, we can see everyone's test scores?"

"Of course. It's allowed by the school's rules."

There was absolutely no privacy, nothing concealed. Just like a company might post up every salesman's profits, our chart exposed the capable and the incapable alike.

The threshold for failing hadn't changed from the previous test,

but the situation was a little different.

"A score of forty or higher is considered a passing grade for all subjects. Anyone with a score under forty will face expulsion. These scores also reflect your results from the sports festival. If anyone achieved a score of over one hundred points on this test because of their sports festival results, the school will treat them as having received a perfect score."

Meanwhile, the school would deduct ten points from the midterm scores of the ten students with the lowest sports festival results. Sotomura was one of the worst-scoring students in the sports festival from *any* grade, so he needed to score ten points higher in every subject to compensate.

Ike and Sudou wore stiff expressions. Many students waited with bated breath as Chabashira-sensei slowly posted the scores on the blackboard. However, Horikita didn't seem nervous at all.

"Wh-what?! No way!"

The results started with those students who scored lowest and went up. Many students naturally expected to see Sudou's name at the bottom of the list, because he'd scored lowest on the midterm and the final exam. However, the first name to come up was "Haruki Yamauchi." Next was "Ike Kanji."

Following that came Inogashira, Satou, and Sotomura. Sotomura always had middling scores, but I imagined that the penalties he'd incurred from the sports festival resulted in him ranking this low.

"Oh no! Dude, did I seriously get the lowest score?!" wailed Yamauchi.

Fortunately, he'd scored over forty points in every subject, his lowest grade being a forty-three in English. He barely passed overall, with an average just slightly below fifty points. Yamauchi probably felt as if his life flashed before his eyes for a moment. He broke out in a cold sweat.

Sudou's results were more surprising. Until today, he'd always ranked at the very bottom of the class, but now he'd moved up significantly, going to twelfth from the bottom. Even if you took away his sports festival points, his results were still incredible. Everyone looked shocked; he had an average score of fifty-seven points.

“I just obliterated a personal best! Dude, I almost got an average score of sixty!” Sudou shouted. He shot up and began literally dancing with joy.

“That’s not good enough to merit such a fuss,” said Horikita. “Especially since your sports festival points helped.”

“Guh! Y-yeah…” Sudou sat back down, looking despondent at Horikita’s rebuke. He was just like a faithful dog responding to his master’s orders.

“Sudou got an average of fifty-seven points. Study group gets results,” I remarked.

Even in his worst subject, English, Sudou had remarkably managed to score fifty-two points. Apparently, Horikita had tutored Sudou and the other failing students. I wasn’t invited to help tutor the group, but that was only natural. From the others’ perspective, I wasn’t in the “smart people” category.

“The study group had an impact, yes. However, other significant factors helped. Sudou was lucky that this midterm test was made up of relatively simple problems,” Horikita said.

“That might be true.” This midterm had been, without a doubt, a bit easier than usual. Some questions were so easy I thought the school might’ve included them by mistake. That said, Sudou’s hard work definitely paid off. Horikita tutored all her students equally, but Sudou had taken things a step further, giving up his free days to study one-on-one with her. The power of love really was a terrifying thing.

“You have an average of sixty-four points. That’s so mediocre. Why don’t you stop fooling around and get serious?” Horikita asked me.

“That was the absolute best I could do.” I usually scored around fifty points, so it’d attract attention if I suddenly got a perfect score. I thought it would be best if I made slow but steady progress. That said, Sudou’s breakthrough meant I could probably afford to increase my score a little more.

“It’s so insipid that you’re still playing the clown. Honestly, I can’t listen to you anymore.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever listened to me,” I replied.

“I suppose that’s true.”

At any rate, because the test problems had been simple, there

were a few perfect scores among those students at the top of the class. Chabashira-sensei even gave us a genuine compliment. “As you can see, no one has to drop out of school due to their midterm scores this time. All of you managed to pass.”

“Obviously. I’m looking forward to next month’s private points, sensei!” said Sudou, his elbows propped up on his desk.

Chabashira-sensei responded with an unchanging smile. “That’s right. It would be reasonable to expect a private point increase in November. I must say, in the three years I’ve taught at this school, no other Class D has held on this long without any students dropping out. Well done.”

Chabashira-sensei had never shown us this side of her personality until today. Quite a few students seemed hesitant to believe that it was genuine.

“You praising us feels weird.” Horikita was hard to fool. Although it was wonderful that no one had failed, she understood that Chabashira-sensei wasn’t the type to end on a positive note. The gentler Chabashira-sensei acted, the creepier we all felt.

Our teacher’s hair, tied up into a ponytail, swayed bewitchingly. Chabashira-sensei slowly passed between the rows of desks, as if intending to make a trip around the classroom. When she arrived at Ike’s desk, she stopped.

“You managed to pass, but I want to ask you something. What do you think of this school? I’d like to hear your honest evaluation.”

“Well, I guess…it’s a good school. If you do well, you can get tons of spending money. The food’s tasty, and the rooms are nice and clean,” said Ike. He counted on his fingers as he listed more things. “You can buy games and stuff. Plus, there’re movies to see and karaoke. And the girls are cute.”

That last part wasn’t really the school’s doing, of course.

“Um…d-did I say something wrong?” asked Ike, looking fearfully at Chabashira-sensei.

“No. From a student’s perspective, this is quite a paradise. Even as a teacher, I feel that this school is almost excessively lavish. It treats the students here so well that it almost defies common sense,” she replied.

Chabashira-sensei began to walk once more, heading for my side

of the classroom. I had the feeling she was going to ask me a question in front of the rest of the class. *Don't talk to me.*

Fortunately, it seemed my request was heard, and Chabashira-sensei stopped next to Hirata's desk this time. "Hirata, do you like this school?" she asked.

"Yes. I've made lots of friends, and I'm enjoying a fulfilling life." Hirata's response was exemplary.

"Don't you feel anxious, knowing that you could be expelled if you happen to make a single mistake?"

"Whenever I'm nervous, I work harder with everyone else," he replied.

Chabashira-sensei returned to the podium. It seemed as though she was trying to confirm something, but I didn't understand what. Maybe she wanted a better sense of our class's morale. Was she gauging our stamina, to see whether we could handle what was to come?

"Next week, in preparation for the second semester's final exam, there will be a short test with problems from eight subjects. I'm sure that some of you have already started studying, but I just wanted to remind you," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Geh! And I was just recovering from the midterm! Another test?!" Ike wailed. Obviously, tests were an important part of student life, but in the second semester the intervals between them were rather quick. "That means there's only a week left until the next short quiz! I haven't heard about this at all!"

Actually, the teachers constantly reminded us about the upcoming quiz. Ike's obliviousness made me want to sigh deeply.

"Saying that you haven't heard about it won't do. Don't worry, though, Ike." Chabashira-sensei smiled as if she were throwing Ike a lifeline, but she did nothing purely out of the kindness of her heart. We knew her better than that.

Well, most of us did.

"Really, sensei? So, I can relax and take it easy? Woo!" shouted Ike.

Chabashira-sensei looked away from him. "There will be one hundred questions on the test, making for a total of one hundred possible points. However, the questions will be on a third-year junior

high school level. This test is meant to confirm that you remember your fundamentals. Furthermore, much like the mock test you took in the first semester, it won't affect your grades."

"R-really? Good!"

"However—this test's results will have an enormous impact on your next final exam," she added.

Of course. Nothing could be simple at this school. Our next challenge was about to begin, it seemed.

"Wait, what kind of impact? Can you tell us?" Sudou asked. I understood his frustration. Chabashira-sensei had purposefully drawn things out to exacerbate the class's anxieties.

"I would love to help you understand, Sudou. The school has decided that this next quiz's results will help determine which students to partner in class," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Partner?" Hirata sounded suspicious.

"That's right. Pairs decided based on this test will go on to take the final exam together. There will be eight subjects on that exam, each worth a total of one hundred points. Four hundred test questions, fifty for each subject. There are also two possible ways for you to fail that exam. If your pair scores under sixty in even one subject, then the school will expel both students. The sixty-point total, by the way, refers to the partners' combined score. For example, let's say Ike and Hirata were partners. Even if Ike scored zero points, they'd both be safe as long as Hirata scored sixty points."

Everyone gasped. With an excellent partner, this would be an easy test.

However, this still left the second method of failing.

"There's one additional hurdle to overcome. The school has decided that you must secure a certain overall score to avoid failing. Even if you get sixty points or more in each of the eight individual subjects, failing to meet this overall score requirement will mean expulsion."

"So, the overall requirement represents both partners' combined score?"

"Yes, exactly. The school hasn't yet determined the exact score required, but in years past, it's been around seven hundred points," said

Chabashira-sensei.

Seven hundred points. With two people working together across eight subjects—sixteen scores in total, two for each subject—you'd need a minimum average of 43.75 points in every subject. Even excellent students like Horikita or Yukimura could be at risk, depending on their partner.

"You mentioned that the overall required score is still unclear. Why?" asked Hirata.

"Don't be so hasty. I'll explain the overall requirements in more detail later. The final exam will be held over two days, with four subjects per day, and I'll let you know the subjects' order. In the event that someone is absent due to poor health, the school will investigate the absence's legitimacy. If it's confirmed to be unavoidable, the student will receive points based on a rough estimate of what they would've earned given past test results. However, should the school find that an absent student didn't have sufficient reason to miss class, they will receive a score of zero points for all tests missed," Chabashira-sensei replied.

We couldn't avoid taking this exam. The school was telling us that caring for our health was another test of ability.

"At any rate, you're starting to behave like proper students. If this announcement were earlier in the year, you'd probably all be wailing by now."

"Well, we've gotten used to it," Ike responded.

"Well said, Ike. Many of you probably think the same thing, which is why I'm going to give you just one piece of advice. Don't assume that you understand how this school works just because you've finished the first semester of your first year. In the future, you'll face countless exams far more difficult than those you face now," Chabashira-sensei replied.

"P-please don't say such terrifying things, sensei," said one of the girls.

"Well, it's the truth. In years past… We call it the 'Paper Shuffle,' but one or two pairs are usually expelled due to this test. Most of them are from Class D. This is by no means a threat; I'm just telling you the facts."

The class's optimism rapidly faded. But what did Chabashira-sensei mean by "Paper Shuffle," exactly?

"The school will expel any failed partners without exception. If you think this is a mere threat, then it might be good for you to talk to an upperclassman. You should've started building connections with them, after all," said Chabashira-sensei. "Lastly, although this is obvious, cheating is forbidden. Anyone who cheats will immediately be disqualified and expelled, along with their partner. The same applies to all midterm and final examinations."

If this were an ordinary high school, the punishment for cheating would probably be an automatic zero in all subjects, a stern warning, or suspension at the very most. Chabashira-sensei was giving us ample warning to prevent students from panicking and making mistakes. However, the pair system was still a real problem.

"After I get the short test's results, I'll tell you how the all-too-important partners will be decided," Chabashira-sensei added.

I quietly picked up my pen. Horikita grabbed hers at almost the exact same time and started writing something. Since she was taking notes, I put my own pen down. If Horikita was on it, I was useless.

"If you get partnered with the student at the bottom, won't you be in deep trouble?" Sudou asked.

"Ugh! Ken's humiliating me! I'm going to study hard and turn things around!" Yamauchi cried.

"Don't push yourself. You're all talk. You haven't seen anything yet; I've been studying a lot," said Sudou.

Yamauchi slumped, looking as though he were writhing in agony. Sudou's words weren't empty; as long as Horikita kept helping him, he really would work hard.

"One more aspect of this final exam will challenge you," said Chabashira-sensei.

While the rest of the class was slightly agitated by this, Horikita appeared mildly exasperated. "So, there's *another* thing we have to do?"

"Yes. First, the school will ask you to create your own questions to appear on the final exam. They'll use the questions you come up with for one of the other three classes. That means classes will be able to attack one another, so to speak. The school will compare your class's

overall score to the overall score for the class that received your test questions. The class that scores higher will take points from the losing class. Fifty class points, specifically," said Chabashira-sensei.

To sum up, pairs needed to score above seven hundred points in aggregate or be expelled. Meanwhile, we also needed to score sixty points or higher for each individual subject or be expelled. Furthermore, our entire class's overall score had to exceed the overall score of the class whose test questions we set.

"But let's say Class A attacks Class B, and Class D attacks Class A," said Horikita. "If Class A successfully carries out their attack on Class B while simultaneously defending against Class D, they'll gain a total of one hundred points. However, if Class A attacks Class D and Class D attacks Class A, won't things just cancel each other out?"

"In the event of a one-on-one confrontation of that kind, class scores may go up or down by a hundred points at a time. Don't worry. Although this is unlikely, if the overall scores are tied, then the matchup will end in a draw, and no class will lose or gain points," said Chabashira-sensei.

"So, we have to come up with problems for the other classes to solve. I've never heard of anything like this. How will this be executed? If someone devises absurdly hard questions…"

"Yeah, yeah! That's right! They could pick stuff we haven't learned yet! This is impossible!" Ike and some other students threw up their hands in frustration.

"Teachers will evaluate the questions you create. If they exceed what you have been taught, or cannot be answered with the information provided, they will be revised. We'll ensure that each class submits fair questions and answers. Do you understand, Ike?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Uh, yeah, I guess," he replied. It sounded deceptively easy, but probably wasn't that simple.

"Creating four hundred questions, huh? That'll make for a pretty tight schedule," said Hirata.

We had about a month left until the test. A single person would have to come up with ten to fifteen questions per day to get them done in time. Although we could put several people to work devising questions, that would cause some variation in quality. If we had to

make any revisions after submitting the problems to the school, we'd need to work quickly. If you also took Class D's flaws into account, finishing the questions would come down to the wire. Hirata must have understood that, because he looked flustered.

"If you don't complete the questions in time, certain measures are in place to help you. After the submission deadline passes, the school will utilize its own premade questions. However, please keep in mind that those questions will be easier," said Chabashira-sensei.

Only a mixed blessing, then. We had to create our own questions, no matter what, which meant someone would have to do the lion's share of that work in addition to managing their own studies. This test would be brutal.

"You may consult teachers and students from other classes, and you can use the internet. There are few restrictions. As long as the school accepts the questions, we don't care about much else," said Chabashira-sensei.

"So, our final test will obviously include questions from another class, right?"

"Exactly. Each class will choose another class to compete against, and I will report that request to my superiors. If another class makes the same choice, representatives will draw lots. However, if there are no duplicate nominations, your choice of class will be honored. I'll accept your nomination for the class you'd like to go up against next week, the day before the short test. You should think very carefully," she added.

The final exam was us against the school—but this time, it was a street fight. Who we'd be paired with was the least of our worries right now.

"That's all for the preliminary explanation. The rest is up to you," said Chabashira-sensei.

With that, our classes ended for the day.

3.1

"We're holding a meeting, Ayanokouji-kun. Can you get Hirata-kun for me?" Horikita asked.

"Roger."

I went to talk to Hirata, and Horikita walked over to Sudou. Horikita and Hirata were gradually becoming the class's prime movers and shakers. I couldn't stay in the shadows much longer. So far, I'd kept up the pretense of not being the sharpest tool in the shed. However, after running that relay race, I became well-known practically overnight. Ryuuen and Ichinose wanted the identity of the person pulling Horikita's strings, without a doubt.

What should I do about that? Distance myself from Horikita? That would look suspicious, though. Should I stick close to her and wait for things to pass? I'd be under suspicion so long as I remained around her, too.

Our list of enemies was growing. I'd been able to hang out with Horikita as much as I did because she'd had very few friends, but things were changing. Maybe I'd put some distance between her and myself, then. I needed to keep Chabashira-sensei happy, and if Horikita and the others could handle the class without me, it would take a load off my shoulders. Chabashira-sensei probably didn't need *me,* specifically, to help Class D. Anyone would do. As for why she wanted to threaten me into helping Class D rise to Class A, well, I didn't really care.

At any rate, it wasn't time for me to release Horikita just yet. If I let go right here and now, I'd lose control of Class D, and everything might collapse. First, I'd make Horikita even more influential. Then, I'd quietly fade away.

I returned to Horikita. "Hirata's on his way. Same with Sudou." I'd seen him duck out, probably to go to the bathroom.

"So, what do you think?" Horikita cut to the chase.

"It's just like Chabashira-sensei said. This exam will be difficult. The bar is high, and the partner system makes it worse. To top it off, if another class comes up with the problems we have to solve, the test could get extremely tough. Depending on how the question's worded,

even something straightforward could appear unsolvable."

"That's true. This time, it's not just about studying. We have to be creative," said Horikita.

Simply tutoring the weaker students among us wouldn't be enough. Understanding the other classes' strengths and weaknesses would be ideal, but they wouldn't show us their hands easily. Still, we'd overcome trials based on intelligence and teamwork before.

In a sense, this test might be less difficult than the ones on the island or the cruise ship. If the sports festival had tested our class's accumulated physical strength, this was a test of accumulated academic knowledge.

"I feel as if Chabashira-sensei was hinting at something," I told Horikita.

"Yes. I noticed," she replied quietly. "The school packs hints into everything. The three key points Chabashira-sensei made were that the short test won't affect our grades, that the criteria for the combined scores hadn't been decided yet, and that they'd determine our partners after the short test."

I instinctively smiled in response to Horikita's perfect, concise breakdown. Not long afterward, Hirata joined us.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. You wanted to discuss plans, right?" Hirata called to Karuizawa to join us. Though she glared at us as if it was a huge bother, she came.

"Sorry. I thought that we should talk things over right away," Horikita said. A few months ago, it would've been shocking for her to initiate a meeting like this. Now, though, she was the class's commander. "I'd like to start right away."

"Huh? Wait, right here? No way. If we're talking things over, we might as well go to Pallet. Right, Yousuke-kun?" asked Karuizawa.

Karuizawa tightly hugged Hirata's arm, snuggling close to him. It was her usual method of getting what she wanted. Pallet was a café on school grounds, one that mostly catered to girls. During lunch breaks and after class, it often overflowed with people.

My eyes met Karuizawa's for an instant. Though I didn't know why, she quickly let go of Hirata's arm.

"We don't know where the enemy might be watching us from,

but… Well, it's fine, I suppose," replied Horikita. She probably understood that it would be unwise to antagonize Karuizawa right now. She might not have been consciously aware of it, but Horikita was definitely maturing.

"Excuse me, but would it be all right if I joined you, too?" Kushida Kikyou asked. "Is that okay…?"

"I'm fine with you joining us. You understand our class very well, Kushida-san. Besides, I'd like to hear several people's opinions," I said.

"Of course, Kushida-san. I planned on inviting you, anyway," said Horikita. That was a surprising move. "Could you three head over to Pallet first? I have a few things to take care of."

Kushida, Karuizawa, and Hirata agreed and left without any particular objections. I turned to Horikita.

"Is that really okay? Bringing Kushida in?"

Kushida Kikyou was a valuable asset, but she also hated Horikita. I couldn't say for certain that she wouldn't try to sabotage us. Furthermore, during the sports festival, Kushida's betrayal put Class D in a tight spot.

"Wouldn't it seem weird to refuse her?" Horikita replied.

"Sorry to make you wait, Suzune," said Sudou, coming up to us.

"It's all right. Hirata-kun and the others are meeting us at Pallet, anyway."

"Okay, sure. Hey, uh, sorry about this…but, um, would it be okay if I peeked in on my club? The upperclassmen asked for me to be there. It should be over in, like, twenty or thirty minutes," said Sudou.

"I don't mind. Come join us as soon as you finish," replied Horikita.

Sudou flashed a smile, grabbed his bag, and hurried out of the classroom. Horikita picked up her own bag and headed to the door.

"I think I'm gonna head back to my dorm. Give it your best," I told her.

"Wait a minute. You were invited, too. You're absolutely indispensable as the intermediary between Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san. I still can't control either of them," said Horikita.

"You say that, but I think you're a capable leader. Besides, the

final exam will test everything we've learned. You and your study group handled the midterm without my help."

"That might be true. But if Kushida-san is in the group, it's a different story. Can you at least participate in today's discussion? Or don't you want the truth about Kushida?" asked Horikita.

"If I said I wasn't interested, I'd be lying." Kushida showed no favoritism toward anyone, and treated everybody in class equally, so I wanted to know why she held such animosity for Horikita alone.

"I'll tell you everything I know about her," said Horikita. "Honestly, I don't want to go around spreading rumors, but I think informing you is necessary."

"I wonder why you're so interested in talking to me about Kushida."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you kept quiet about her until now. When did you two start fighting?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Horikita went quite stiff. "I can't talk to you about it here. Understand?"

Even the walls had ears, after all. "I understand. I suppose I'll come along with you."

I imagined that the story was worth going to a meeting.

Out in the hallway, Horikita spoke to me in a hushed whisper. "Where would you like me to start?" she asked.

"From the beginning. All I know is that you two aren't on good terms." I wanted more information on Kushida's dark side, but I didn't dare bring it up. I wasn't sure how much Horikita was aware of.

"I really don't know much at all about Kushida Kikyou. When did you first meet her?" Horikita asked.

I answered honestly. "On the bus."

"I see. I also saw Kushida-san on the bus on the first day of school," she replied.

I remembered that an elderly woman on the bus had been forced to stand because there weren't any open seats. Kushida had asked if someone would give the old lady a seat, a good deed in and of itself, a faultless act of kindness. However, no one gave theirs up right away. As

one of those who hadn't offered, the scene had left a deep impression on me.

"You think Kushida started hating you back then? Kouenji also refused to give up his seat. I didn't give mine up, either," I told her. "But you're the only one she hates."

"I didn't know Kushida-san back then. Well, to be more accurate, I didn't remember her," said Horikita.

"So, you knew each other before you met at this school?"

"Yes. We attended the same junior high, but it was in a completely different prefecture. Even in her wildest dreams, she probably never imagined that someone from her junior high would end up here too," Horikita said.

"I see." Horikita had solved one great mystery.

"I remembered her after the first-semester study group. My junior high was an enormous school with over a thousand students. I was never in the same class as Kushida-san," said Horikita. "I didn't know her."

That wasn't really a surprise, if I assumed that Horikita had been as solitary back in junior high as she was now. She'd probably immersed herself in studying.

Horikita and I didn't head straight for Pallet. Instead, we spent time wandering around school, taking a detour. The farther away from the café we went, the fewer people were around.

"What was Kushida like in junior high?"

"No idea. Like I said, I didn't interact with her. However, she was incredibly popular. Looking back, I remember classmates rallying around her during all kinds of events. She was nice to everyone, sociable, and well liked. She had the same level of influence as the student council," said Horikita.

"I don't think she hates you just because she couldn't befriend you," I said.

"You're right. The crucial part comes next. However, please keep in mind that this is nothing more than a rumor. Only Kushida-san herself knows the full truth." With that preface out of the way, Horikita continued. "In February of our third year, just as graduation approached, one entire class fell apart."

“Fell apart? What, like they all got sick?”

“No. Apparently, a certain female student triggered an incident that destroyed her class. They didn’t recover until graduation,” said Horikita.

“I don’t even need to ask who that girl was, do I?”

“It was Kushida-san. But I don’t know the details. The school completely buried the incident. If it became public knowledge, their credibility would take a hit. It would even affect graduates who wanted to advance to higher education or find a job. Still, the school couldn’t suppress *everything*. Rumors started to spread,” said Horikita.

“Do you know anything, even if it’s just a fragment of a rumor?” I asked.

“Some students said that the classroom was in complete disarray right after the incident. The blackboard and desks were covered with all kinds of slanderous scribblings.”

“Covered with slander, huh? Is it possible Kushida was bullied, then?”

“I don’t know. So many rumors floated around. Someone was being bullied, or they were doing the bullying. I even heard rumors about violence, though the details were vague. But then the rumors stopped in the blink of an eye. No one wanted to talk about it. Even though a whole class nearly fell apart, people suddenly acted as if nothing had happened.”

“Still, it’s not like it’s your fault that Kushida made that class fall apart. I’m sure you weren’t paying attention to what happened, anyway.”

“You’re exactly right. I knew I wanted to come to this school, so I was utterly focused on preparing. I didn’t care that much about anything else,” Horikita replied.

I couldn’t imagine the Kushida I knew doing any of that. However, if this were true, then I understood why she couldn’t allow anyone who knew the truth about her to stick around. If people found out, Kushida would lose all the social capital she’d gained.

“So, Kushida did something bad, but you don’t know the specific details. However, she doesn’t seem to know that *you* don’t know. She believes that, because you attended the same junior high, you know

everything that happened."

"She isn't exactly wrong. I *do* know that she caused the incident." Horikita sighed.

The tension between them was all thanks to Kushida's one-sided misunderstanding and hostility. Kushida would do anything to keep her past hidden. Even if Horikita said that she knew nothing about the incident, Kushida wouldn't believe her. If Kushida knew what we were currently discussing, she would've taken it as proof that Horikita knew about her past.

"I still don't understand," Horikita said.

"About the incident?"

"Yeah. It's just all so weirdly mysterious. How does a class with no problems collapse all of a sudden?" She shook her head.

"It's possible that Kushida triggered it, but how could one single student have that much power?" I replied. This didn't come down to simple bullying. If that were the case, only a few people would've been involved.

"Honestly, I can't imagine," said Horikita.

Even if I'd wanted Class D to fall apart, I couldn't cause it just like that. "You'd need a powerful weapon," I said.

"If you wanted to destroy our class, what would you do?"

"To answer your question with another question, what's the deadliest weapon in the world? What can Kushida manipulate? Think about it," I said.

"As I've said before, violence is the deadliest weapon a human being can wield. It has rather unique power. No matter how clever the scholar or how influential the politician, no one is physically invulnerable," said Horikita.

"You're not wrong. Violence is one of the deadliest weapons. However, Kushida didn't use violence to corner everyone. If that were true, you'd have heard." If Kushida had gone on a rampage with a chainsaw, the media would've had a field day. "What about something that can compete with violence's unique power?"

"Do you have something in mind?" asked Horikita.

"Let's say that I was the one setting out to destroy our class. In

that case, I can think of something I'd use. Can you?"

"Wait." Horikita gave it some thought. "I want to say 'authority,' but how many students have authority like that?"

"Authority is a powerful weapon, but even the student council president couldn't create that much mayhem. There's no way someone like Kushida could reduce a class to nothing through authority."

"Then what is it? What can bring an entire class to its knees?"

"Forget Kushida for a moment. What powerful weapon is available to anyone? Lies. People are natural liars by birth. Anyone can lie. Depending on the time and the place, a lie can do more damage than simple violence."

Statistics show that people lie two or three times a day, on average. You might think that seems impossible, but the definition of a "lie" is rather broad. "I didn't get enough sleep," "I caught a cold," "I didn't notice that email," "I'm fine." Everything we say is full of lies.

"Lies. I see. You might be right."

Lies were incredibly powerful. A single lie could even drive someone to their death. "I'll cut right to the chase. If you used violence and lies, could you cause Class D to fall apart? Think about it."

"I can't say for sure. Hypothetically speaking, I couldn't overcome some people in our class with violence. I can't imagine defeating Sudou-kun or Kouenji-kun with my bare hands. Besides, there are also people like you whose strengths I don't fully know," said Horikita.

"Right. Anyone can use violence, but not everyone can use it effectively," I told her.

"I can't see Kushida-san using much violence. So, if the options are violence or lies, it's only natural to conclude that she lied to destroy her class," said Horikita.

"Yes."

"But…could she really do that?"

"Dunno. For her, it might not be impossible," I said. Still, bringing down an entire class was an extensive undertaking. "Can Kushida really command such power? Or maybe…"

Maybe Kushida had a secret third weapon? Regardless, she'd certainly been the culprit. If she wasn't the one who destroyed her class,

she wouldn't be this hostile toward Horikita.

"Kushida-san told me that she'd use any means necessary to get rid of anyone who knew about her past. That she'd even work with Katsuragi-kun, Sakayanagi-san, or Ichinose-san to drive me out. She's already formed an alliance with Ryuuen-kun to entrap me. She won't stop as long as I'm here, even if Class D suffers," said Horikita.

"So, she's prepared to destroy our class to hide her past."

"I have no doubt."

That couldn't be an idle threat. Yet, even though Kushida had declared war, she'd wanted to work with Horikita and Hirata today. Maybe that choice was designed to maintain her position in class, but it was likely a hostile act. She was probably trying to gather information.

Still, even if she was a spy, we needed Kushida. She'd built up significant goodwill in Class D. If we started treating her like an outsider, the other students wouldn't trust us.

"How do you plan to deal with Kushida, Horikita?" I asked.

"My options are limited. I can tell her that I don't know any details about the incident, or that I won't say anything to anyone, and hope I'll convince her."

"It probably won't be that simple. Kushida will remain suspicious, and she likely won't forgive you for even knowing about her past." Horikita had turned to me for help, which Kushida probably anticipated. It wasn't surprising that Kushida included me on the list of people she wanted to have expelled.

"I still think my best option is to talk to her. Am I wrong?" asked Horikita.

"No, I agree with you. Trying to convince her is probably the only solution." For now. Eventually, Kushida would push back in a big way. "I might be jumping too far ahead, but if we're going to reach Class A, we might need to give up on Kushida."

Horikita glared at me. "You mean we should get Kushida-san expelled?"

I nodded quietly. Strike your enemy down first; that was basic strategy. However, Horikita looked disgusted.

"I didn't think you'd propose something like that. When I decided

to let Sudou-kun fail months ago, you were the one who convinced me to help him instead. And I understood. We couldn't turn our backs on a person with something to offer. To tell you the truth, if I'd abandoned Sudou-kun back then, the sports festival probably would've ended even more disastrously. And you saw how much he improved on the midterm. Am I wrong?"

The once-solitary Horikita had changed greatly. I was surprised to see such a radical transformation in her. Still, her plan wasn't realistic. She'd done a good job of getting Sudou on our side, but I doubted that Horikita, who wasn't silver-tongued to begin with, could successfully win Kushida over.

"This is different from just tutoring someone. To be honest, I don't think Kushida's feelings are solely what drive her. This is more than just a simple lack of understanding on her part. As long as you're at this school, Kushida will attempt to sabotage you, and Class D may pay the price. Are you sure you won't regret letting her stay?" I asked.

Horikita didn't look swayed. On the contrary, she appeared more determined than before. "She's an excellent student. Not only can she win people's hearts and minds, she's also a keen observer. If we make her our ally, she'll be a great asset."

True enough, but could it even be done?

"This is my responsibility. I can't just abandon her. I'm sure she'll understand," said Horikita.

"If that's what you want, then all right. I'll keep watch." I wanted to believe it might work out. I wanted to see whether Horikita could really befriend Kushida, just as she'd turned Sudou into someone she could trust.

"I didn't say I wanted your help," said Horikita.

"Yeah, you're right. This has nothing to do with me," I responded. We'd almost completed a lap around the campus. We would arrive at Pallet shortly.

"I told you about Kushida-san because I thought that you'd keep it secret, and that you'd understand," said Horikita.

"Sorry I didn't give you the answer you wanted."

"Since I provided all this information, would you answer a question?" she asked.

“What is it?”

Horikita stopped dead in her tracks and looked up at me. “What did you do to Ryuuen-kun at the sports festival?”

“What did *I* do? I compromised, that’s it. All I did was ensure that Ryuuen’s plans were crushed,” I told her.

“You mean, you recorded the conversation Ryuuen-kun had with the Class C students? When he discussed his strategy?”

I nodded.

“It can’t have been easy to get that recording. How did you do it? Ryuuen-kun said there was a spy, but you’re not friends with anyone from Class C, are you?”

“I have my ways. I used what I had at my disposal.” Of course, Horikita didn’t know about the trouble Manabe and her friends had caused Karuizawa back on the cruise ship.

“Another thing. I was angry that you came to my rescue like that, because it meant that you thought I would fail. But I suppose I *was* about to fail, so…I can’t argue with you. Since you forbade me from prying into your affairs, I can’t demand that you tell me more. Though it was troubling, it… Well, if you hadn’t done anything, I would’ve… Well, thank you,” said Horikita.

“That was an amazingly roundabout way of thanking me.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with being this conspicuous? Ryuuen-kun is now convinced that someone in Class D is working behind the scenes, and you’re probably on his list, Ayanokouji-kun. I think the peaceful life you wanted is in jeopardy,” said Horikita.

True, my high school life was becoming more stressful than I ever wished it to be. But peace might never have been an option. Chabashira-sensei had already mentioned a certain man who wanted to see me. Then there was Sakayanagi, who knew my past.

“Good point. We’ll have to be especially cautious.”

“I’m starting to understand you less and less,” said Horikita.

“You never understood me at all.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

At any rate, Horikita didn’t have time to focus on Ryuuen or me. If she didn’t deal with Kushida, her days at this school might be

numbered.

3.2

As soon as we entered Pallet, Karuizawa glared at Horikita.

“Jeez, what were you even doing?! You’re so late! At least apologize.”

“Let’s get started. After all, Hirata-kun has club activities, right?” said Horikita.

“Wow, you just ignored me. Typical,” said Karuizawa.

Besides Horikita and myself, the group now consisted of Hirata, Karuizawa, Kushida, and Sudou. Horikita was right that there wasn’t much of a grace period before club activities. It was already 3:50 in the afternoon, and clubs convened at 4:30. Hirata, who was in the soccer club, should have been the most anxious, but he remained calm and collected. Maybe he was sincerely looking forward to this meeting, since his eyes shone.

After Horikita took her seat, she immediately launched into the conversation. “Let’s discuss the upcoming short test, shall we?”

“Is it really that important? I mean, the school pretty much guaranteed that our grades won’t reflect our test results,” said Karuizawa.

“I wasn’t going to force people to study. However, the school isn’t making us take this test simply to measure our academic ability. We just passed the midterm, after all.”

“We all passed because the midterm had easy questions, right?”

“So, there’s some special significance to the short test? Does the school want to measure something other than our academics?” asked Hirata-kun.

“Huh? What? What are you talking about?” asked Karuizawa, perking up considerably as Hirata spoke.

“The short test’s results will influence partner selection for the final exam. That’s why it matters,” explained Horikita. Sudou looked somber. “Do you understand, Sudou?”

“Just barely.” Sudou’s grasp on the current situation appeared dubious at best.

“There must be some kind of process to select the pairs,” Horikita continued. “If we discover that process, we can gain a clear advantage in the final.”

“What’s that mean, Ayanokouji?” Sudou whispered. He most likely didn’t want to interrupt Horikita’s explanation.

“It means that controlling the short test’s outcome is necessary to clear the final exam,” I answered.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Sudou’s lie was so incredibly obvious.

“So what? Will they match up the people who scored closest together or something?” said Karuizawa.

“Or maybe they’ll pair someone who got an answer right with someone who got the same answer wrong?” asked Sudou.

“Either is possible,” said Horikita.

Hirata seemed to have some doubts, since his expression turned serious. “I’m a little skeptical about this.”

“About what? Please, I’d like to hear it,” said Horikita.

“If there *is* some kind of partner selection method, then I think we should confirm it with an upperclassman,” Hirata said. “If it’s the same test from previous years, then the rules probably haven’t changed. Maybe the teachers would deliberately try to hide that?”

Kushida had listened quietly up to this point. After Hirata’s comment, she spoke. “I was a little curious, too. I think an upperclassman I’m close with might be willing to tell me.”

“Wow, just as expected, Yousuke-kun! You’re right!” Karuizawa showered Hirata with admiration.

Horikita side-eyed her. “As Hirata-kun said, it’s certainly true that we don’t know the facts. However, the school hasn’t tried to stop us from finding out what the rules are. In fact, discovering them might be one of the test’s prerequisites.”

“What do you mean, Suzune? Can you explain it like we’re dumb?” asked Sudou. He looked as if he’d racked his brain so intensely that smoke was about to shoot out of his ears.

“So, the test begins once we find out the rules? In that case, not learning what they are could be disastrous,” said Hirata. He was

probably imagining a scenario in which the school expelled half the class.

“This is all just hypothetical, but if we don’t discover the process behind the pairing, the results could be devastating. Chabashira-sensei said this is the first time that Class D has made it this far without anyone being expelled. She also said that, in previous years, only one or two pairs were typically expelled, right? Isn’t that strange?” asked Horikita.

“Nope,” said Sudou. He banged his forehead against the table in resignation.

“I see what you mean,” Hirata said. “Horikita-san is trying to say that, if we understand how this all works, we might not suffer any serious harm. Right?”

“Correct.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Karuizawa.

“Because we’re taking the final exam in pairs.”

“Yeah,” added Hirata. “If two failing students were paired up, it’d be pretty bad.”

“Again, Chabashira-sensei said that only one or two pairs were expelled in past years. That’s far too few, isn’t it? If the school partnered our class’s weaker students together, it’d probably force close to ten people to drop out,” said Horikita.

“Yousuke-kun, what does this mean?” asked Karuizawa. “I’m getting a little confused.”

“Forget trying to figure out the rules for a moment. Imagine if we took the exam without knowing that these rules even existed. What do you think would happen?” asked Hirata.

“Umm, it’d be bad? If the dumber students got paired, we’d probably see the school expel a lot of people,” said Karuizawa.

“Yeah, I think so, too. But, in past years, only one or two pairs from Class D were expelled.”

“Isn’t that kinda weird?” Sudou seemed to realize what we were saying.

“The pairs seem balanced,” Hirata said.

Indeed. That seemed to be the trick.

“The pairs are made up of a high-scoring student and a low-scoring student,” said Horikita. “It can’t be any other way. So, if I scored a hundred points, and Sudou-kun scored zero points, we’d be the pair with the most significant difference between our scores. That means we’d produce balanced results on the test, because our scores would even out.”

Karuizawa seemed basically convinced. “I see. But doesn’t that mean the average students are the most at risk?”

“Yes. The more average someone’s grades are, the greater the danger,” said Horikita. “We need to confirm this with upperclassmen. Then we can plan our next steps. Hirata-kun, Kushida-san, would you please talk to some senior students?”

“Of course,” said Kushida.

“I’ll check with the upperclassmen in my soccer club,” said Hirata.

“I’d also like to ask one more thing,” said Karuizawa.

“Go ahead.”

“They said we’re being paired up, but what if there’s an odd number of students?”

“I doubt we need to worry about that right now. At the time of enrollment, all classes from A to D had an even number of students. No one’s been expelled yet, so our class sizes haven’t changed. However…if someone *were* expelled, it might place their class as a whole in an excruciating situation.”

“Really? Wouldn’t it suck to suffer just because one person was absent?” Apparently, Kushida thought that the school should be gentler.

“We started the year with an even number of students. If someone is expelled or withdraws due to unforeseen circumstances, their class will have to bear the consequences,” said Horikita.

During the test on the island and the sports festival, the school imposed merciless penalties on nonparticipants. Horikita might’ve been right that, if even one student were kicked out, we’d likely suffer serious disadvantages in future exams. She was probably realizing just how important it had been to save Sudou.

“Do you understand?” Horikita asked.

“Yeah, I guess so. I just feel like thinking about it is a waste of

time," said Karuizawa.

"Now that we've discussed the short test's importance, we can move on. But there's one more thing. Which class do we nominate as our opponent? In my mind, we should be going after Class C," said Horikita. "Their collective academic ability is their big weakness. Class C is inferior to Classes A and B in academics. Looking at the class points so far, that's plain to see."

She wasn't wrong. Deliberately challenging an academically superior class would be nearly suicidal.

However, Hirata offered his own two cents. "I agree, Horikita-san. But Classes A and B will naturally think the same way. If Class C is so inferior when it comes to academics, then multiple classes will likely go after them. That might be bad news for us."

Hirata wrote down the imaginary situation in his notebook.

Class A nominates Class D à *No conflicts with other classes* à *Class D is the target*

Class B nominates Class C à *Wins the lottery* à *Class C is the target*

Class C nominates Class B à *No conflicts with other classes* à *Class B is the target*

Class D nominates Class C à *Loses the lottery* à *Class A becomes the target by default*

"Although this is a worst-case scenario, it could happen," said Hirata.

"Whoa, that'd be awful. We'd have to solve problems the smart kids made, and we'd have to make problems for *them* to solve, right? There's no way we could win," said Karuizawa.

"Yes, you're right, the other classes will probably target Class C. But there's no reason we shouldn't pick Class C too, don't you think? We have to do anything we can to try to win." Horikita didn't care that we might lose the lottery.

"There's a clear academic gap between Classes A and B, isn't there? I'm curious how different we are from Class C," I said.

"There's no doubt Class A is better academically. But I don't think

the difference is that extreme. There does seem to be quite a stark difference between B and C, I think. Hmm, I'll have to investigate this," said Horikita.

Truthfully, we didn't know too much about the other classes. We only knew the difference in points, and based solely on that, we couldn't gauge how smart each class was. Maybe that was the reason for these tests.

Still, I shifted my attention to Sudou.

Horikita did the same. "You're awfully quiet, Sudou-kun. Usually, you'd be complaining by now."

"I just don't get this conversation. Besides, if I started complainin', it'd disturb you," he replied.

We all fell silent.

"What? Did I say somethin' weird?" asked Sudou.

"No, it's just…what you said was so observant and restrained, I was surprised."

"Well, we just gotta defeat our opponents one-on-one, right? We can't immediately jump up to Class A in one shot. So, attacking the class we're closest to—C—makes the most sense," said Sudou.

"I see what you mean," said Horikita. "If our combined score wins against theirs, then the point gap between their class and ours will go down dramatically."

"Okay, but wouldn't it be a good thing if Class A attacked C? I mean, Class A would have no problem beating them. Then Class C would definitely lose points. Wouldn't that be good for us?"

"That depends."

If the goal was to reduce Class C's points, then it might be better for us to let Class A or B attack them. However, Class D also wanted to gain points. To increase the chances of that happening, it would be better to compete against a weaker opponent. Avoiding Class C would mean having to defeat a stronger enemy.

"It seems like everyone agrees with Horikita-san's plan. So, I'll go along with it, too," said Hirata.

"Thank you. I think we can move on to the next stage."

We disbanded a little after 4 p.m. Hirata and Sudou both left for

their respective clubs. Karuizawa followed Hirata.

“Well, I’ll go ask the senior students about the exam and report back,” Kushida said as she left.

“We’re counting on you.” Horikita turned to me. “What are you planning to do, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Nothing. It should be fine if I leave the plans to you and Hirata, right? Honestly, you’ve handled everything so far almost perfectly.”

“So far. But to ace the final exam, we need to be able to tackle it head on,” said Horikita.

“Yeah. If Class D doesn’t study and improve, we’ll get nowhere. If necessary, I can adjust my score in order to team up with a specific person,” I said.

“So, I can count on you?”

“If it’s within my power, sure. I can join your study meetings if needed. But I won’t be a leader.”

“Because you plan to act the mediocre student as long as possible, right?”

“I prefer doing whatever is the least hassle.” I thought it was a fair compromise.

However, Horikita was the furthest thing from undemanding. “Let me think about it. You’re a member of Class D, after all, and I’d like to give you an appropriate role. I want us to win,” she said.

“I’ll consider it.”

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Sotomura Hideo
CLASS:	First Year, Class D
STUDENT ID:	S01T004686
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	January 1st

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	D
INTELLIGENCE:	C+
DECISION MAKING:	D
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	E
COOPERATIVENESS:	C

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

Nothing about this student stands out. He dislikes exercise and is poor at sports. He's shown skill with computers since junior high, and he's repeatedly earned good grades. We hope that, while he continues to improve in his preferred field, he simultaneously expands his interests to things like sports.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

Because of his significant weight gain, I'll encourage him to engage in appropriate kinds of physical activity.

Chapter 4:
Class C Makes Its Move

Meanwhile, in a different classroom, the atmosphere was quite cold and strained. The assembled Class C students appeared greatly intimidated by the person standing at the podium before them.

"There've been many unnatural goings-on, wouldn't you say?" he asked.

Ryuuen Kakeru was Class C's leader and dictator. Yamada Albert, Ishizaki, and other students adept in martial arts stood next to him. They were willing to dispense punishment with their fists, should someone oppose Ryuuen.

"First there was that test on the uninhabited island, and then the sports festival. Someone lurking in Class D knows how to think like me."

"Someone thinks like you, Ryuuen-san? I can't imagine someone like that in Class D, though," said Ishizaki. To him, Ryuuen was a strange, incomprehensible being who commanded both respect and contempt.

Ryuuen smiled at Ishizaki. "I thought so, too. But not anymore."

"So, are the events on the island and at the sports festival connected somehow?"

"Yes, exactly. But don't worry. I'm starting to see how this person handles things. Listen up, all of you! From here on out, we're going to hit Class D with everything we've got. We'll put Classes A and B aside for the time being. I'll smoke out the person working in Class D's shadows," said Ryuuen.

No one objected to his plan. Even if they wanted to, they couldn't. They'd already made a deal with the devil himself.

"Ryuuen-san, is there really anyone competent in Class D, besides Horikita or Hirata?"

"Yes. And someone in Class C can expose the puppet master's true identity."

"What are you trying to say, Ryuuen?" asked Ibuki, crossing her arms. She stood near the window, her posture defiant.

"Heh. Ibuki, can't you even listen quietly?" asked Ryuuen.

"I don't have that luxury. Besides, you're just trying to intimidate the entire class. I gain nothing from silence, right?"

"You know, someone with no authority shouldn't be talking. Besides, you made a rather disgraceful blunder, didn't you?" said Ryuuen.

"That's…"

Ibuki's failure in the sports festival had been significant. She'd requested to challenge Horikita directly, but been narrowly defeated.

"Like you, then?" said Ibuki, glaring at Ryuuen. "I mean, you also failed to crush Horikita in the sports festival, or to get the private points you expected. You're the same as me."

"The same as you? Don't make me laugh. My strategy was perfect," said Ryuuen.

"So, how do you explain the results? You never explain anything. You seriously expect to convince us that Class D has some master strategist?" said Ibuki.

Hearing Ibuki's comeback, the other students trembled in fear. They wanted to avoid incurring Ryuuen's wrath.

However, Ryuuen only smiled thinly. "Don't you think that a perfect strategy is meaningless if someone leaks information?"

"Leaks information?"

"Class D's success is due to the maneuverings of a mysterious person I'll refer to as 'X.' X has an ally in Class C—*my* class. There's a spy among us," said Ryuuen.

Everyone looked slightly confused.

Ibuki's eyes widened in shock. "Wait, are you serious?" she asked.

"It's true. It seems that my control over you isn't strong enough. It's extremely unfortunate," said Ryuuen.

He smiled as if he enjoyed the possibility of being spied upon. Everyone in the room started praying that this would be over quickly.

"This nonsense is coming to an end right this instant," said Ryuuen. He slammed the top of the podium, silencing everyone. "First, I'll ask directly. The person who betrayed me, raise your hand."

Of course, none of his classmates put up their hands. Some averted their eyes and feigned ignorance, while others looked around to see whether anyone came forward. Some stayed completely still to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

"If you just step forward now, I'll forgive you," said Ryuuen. The continuing silence seemed to delight him. "Yes. I knew that a spy would plan to stay hidden. Don't come forward. In fact, stay hidden at all costs."

"Wait, what? You're not seriously going to accept that Class C has a traitor, are you?"

"Shut up, Ibuki. Don't get in the way of my fun. I'll bury you if you do." Ryuuen had been all smiles before, but his face twisted as he glared at Ibuki. "I've actually tried not to get too violent so far. You may think I'm lying, but it's true. I've taken it easy on my opponents."

He slammed the podium twice. BAM! BAM! It was the class's death knell.

"But maybe that was foolish. I mean, now we have a traitor among us."

Ryuuen struck the podium once more. BAM! The sound reverberated through the room. The timid students shook.

"So, we're going to play a little game. A silly, childish little game where we try to find the spy. For most students, there's really no need to be afraid. This shouldn't take long at all; just thirty minutes," said Ryuuen.

Despite his words, it was obvious that everyone was terrified. Even Ibuki started to feel apprehensive.

"First things first. Take your phones out, and place them on your

desks. I'll come by and check personally. Are there any idiots who didn't bring their phones? They should step forward immediately. One of them is the culprit," said Ryuuen.

The students immediately put their phones on their desks. Ishizaki went around the room and collected them, attaching a label with the owner's name to each phone. The labels seemed to have been prepared ahead of time. Ibuki handed her phone over to Ishizaki, looking dissatisfied.

"Ryuuen-san, I collected everyone's phones," said Ishizaki.

"Good work. Well, I think it's time for a thorough investigation, don't you?"

"What should we check? The call histories?"

"Come now, as if someone trying to hide their identity would make an incriminating call! Look at the email histories. Then look at the texts. Read all of them, even if it's just a minor conversation. The traitor might have used an alias."

"W-wait a minute! There are lots of really private messages on my phone, though!" shouted one girl, her desire not to have Ryuuen see her personal information outweighing the risk of him suspecting her.

"You really don't want me to read what's on your phone, Nishino?"

"Of course I don't! Even if it's just you, Ryuuen-kun!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Nishino. You gave Ryuuen your phone on the cruise ship, didn't you?" said Ishizaki. "Why are you so—?"

"Th-this is different from back then! All he did on the cruise ship was check the email I received from the school!"

Ryuuen listened to Nishino's appeal with cold indifference. "You know that this will make you a prime suspect, Nishino?"

"I-I will obey you, Ryuuen-kun, but there are some things I can't accept!"

Nishino wasn't the type to argue, but in this case, it looked like she was dead serious. She'd loudly announced that she had something on her phone that she didn't want other people to see.

"Are you the spy, Nishino?" asked Oda.

"No, I'm not the spy!"

“But the fact that you’re hiding something is pretty suspicious.”

“I just want to protect my privacy!”

Ryuuen showed no interest at all in the current conversation. He grabbed one of the phones. “This is your phone, Nishino?”

“Hey!” Nishino panicked, sure that he’d start reading her messages.

However, Ryuuen handed Nishino’s phone to Ishizaki. “Give this back to her.”

“I-Is that okay? You didn’t check the contents.”

“I told you to give it to her.”

Ishizaki quietly returned Nishino’s phone. She and the other students shook.

“Really, it’s not such a mystery. I confirmed your innocence, so I returned your phone. That’s only natural, right? If it’s not the traitor’s phone, then looking at it would be a waste of time and effort,” said Ryuuen.

“If anyone here thinks that what I’m doing is unacceptable, like Nishino said, raise your hand,” he added. “However, prepare to come under even more suspicion than she did.”

Faced with those two options, four girls and two boys raised their hands, despite their fear.

“Six people are standing up to Ryuuen-san. The spy is definitely among them, I’m sure of it! Nomura-san, you were the last one to raise your hand. You’re not jumping on the bandwagon to save your own skin, are you?” said Ishizaki.

“N-no, that’s not it! I’m not doing that!” said Nomura.

While Ishizaki hurled accusations, Ryuuen wore an eerie smile. “Gather their phones.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ishizaki collected six phones and immediately handed them to Ryuuen.

“So, you’re okay with being my prime suspects as long as I don’t look through your phones?” asked Ryuuen.

All six students agreed.

“You took quite a bit of time before you raised your hand, Nomura.”

“Huh? No, I didn’t—”

“You’ve been looking around all shifty-eyed. And you’re sweating, hmm?”

“Huh?!”

Nomura had a very timid personality, and he seemed on the verge of fainting. Ryuuen let out an amused chuckle before turning to Ishizaki once more. “Ishizaki. These six are all innocent. Return their phones,” he ordered.

A second shock. No one other than Ryuuen himself could understand this reasoning.

“Will you explain what’s going on here?” asked Ibuki.

“Later.” Ryuuen ran his hand through his hair and picked up Ibuki’s phone. “Well then, let’s investigate the rest of the phones. I’ll start with yours, Ibuki.”

“Do whatever you want.”

4.1

Ryuuen checked everyone's phones himself. The whole process took about twenty minutes, no more than one minute per phone. He couldn't have checked all of them thoroughly. Even though the students had their doubts, no one said anything.

For the spy, every second must have been agonizingly stressful.

"I see. No information seems to be recorded on these phones."

"So, one of the people you thought were innocent—like Nishino—is a traitor after all," said Ibuki.

"No," said Ryuuen.

"What are you doing here? Is there really even a spy?" asked Ibuki.

In her heart of hearts, she wondered whether Ryuuen had come up with a story about a traitor to hide his own failure. Ryuuen had believed some shadowy figure was puppeteering Horikita since the island test. So far, however, there hadn't been one shred of evidence that this mastermind even existed. In fact, everyone else had focused on Horikita Suzune.

"Evidence trumps theory," said Ryuuen. "Listen. I assume this is something you all know quite well, hmm?"

He replayed an audio file that X had sent. The voice on the recording was Ryuuen's, explaining his strategy to Class C.

"I received this recording when I was about to force Suzune to kneel," Ryuuen continued. "Never mind the points—because of this, I didn't get to see Suzune beg. Do you understand now?"

"Wait a minute. Even if we assume that you didn't just record that file yourself, there are still questions that you need to answer. We never discussed the details of getting Horikita to kneel before you. This other person managed to anticipate everything, including the time you were meeting her? That's impossible," said Ibuki.

"It was a coincidence. The best time for this other person to strike was immediately after the festival ended. Besides, I don't think he was

interested in saving Suzune," said Ryuuen. "X, Class D's mastermind, had this audio file. X clearly understood the details of the strategy I came up with. If he knew all my plans, including leaking the participation table, he could have foiled my attacks on Suzune at the sports festival. He could have prevented Suzune from being crushed and having to beg for forgiveness. But he didn't. Even though X knew about my strategy, he allowed me to go about my business and let Suzune suffer. She was injured, unable to keep competing, and she had to suffer the guilt of injuring someone else as well."

"So, by letting you get that far, this person turned the audio file into incriminating material?" Kaneda asked. He was a bespectacled boy with a mushroom cut.

"How very clever you are, Kaneda," said Ryuuen.

"This X person's thought process is so cruel. I mean, he just let his friend get hurt."

"Yes. X wasn't bothered by me having Suzune kneel. That's why there wasn't any text in his message. I think he couldn't have cared less whether Suzune's pride was hurt or not," said Ryuuen.

"I can't understand that," said Ibuki. "If they're from the same class, shouldn't he have protected Horikita from the start?"

Other students probably shared Ibuki's feelings. X had had several options available, including altering Class D's participation table to prepare for Class C's strategy, or sending the audio file to Ryuuen in advance.

"Wouldn't X have thought to submit the audio file to the school?"

If X had given the audio file to the school after Class C carried out their plans, it would've hurt Class C badly. If the school found out that Class C had intentionally targeted Horikita and tried to extort points from her, it probably would've kicked Ryuuen out.

With October already half over, however, that possibility had practically vanished. Why would X do all this?

"X's naivete accidentally saved us. Or perhaps he isn't taking full advantage of his assets. If Horikita-shi had finished transferring private points over to Ryuuen-shi, then X would've been defeated," concluded Kaneda.

"No, that's not quite right," said Ryuuen. "Even if Suzune had

given up her private points, X probably could've recovered them by presenting the audio. He could have threatened us with exposure, and that would've been it."

"So, he deliberately chose not to threaten us?"

"Yes. X allowed me to make Suzune kneel. That's different from winning or losing points. It's not something a person can undo, right? I'm saying that X is letting me torment Suzune."

"I don't get it. So, X has been helping Class C?" Ibuki said.

Unlike Ibuki, Ryuuen understood what X had done.

"Heh. So, you really don't intend to reveal yourself, all the way to the bitter end, eh?" he said to Class C.

If Ryuuen kept digging for the audio file's source, he'd eventually force X to reveal himself. He could even contact the school and request that they provide him with email and call records. After thorough investigation, he'd probably arrive at X's identity.

In addition, Ryuuen didn't get the feeling that X was fixated on moving up to Class A at all. Gaining assets didn't matter to X.

"I'm not sure what method X employed, but I'm certain that he thinks like me, and that someone here is spying for him. If the spy knew X's identity, it'd be game over for X the moment I found them out. Therefore, I'm certain that X used email or similar tactics to remain anonymous," said Ryuuen.

"But there wasn't any proof on anyone's phone," said Ibuki. "You didn't even look at them carefully."

"Of course I didn't. That was just for show."

"Huh? But you said you'd know the spy's identity if you looked at our phones."

"Apply some common sense here. If you were the spy, would you intentionally leave a suspicious email on your phone?"

"Well, no, I wouldn't. That's why I thought that checking our phones was a waste of time."

"Right. It was obvious how investigating everyone's phones would turn out. The spy is someone who thought that they could look innocent just by giving me their phone. Therefore, those who didn't show me their phones are innocent, whereas the spy wouldn't have taken that

chance," said Ryuuen.

So, it had all been a stunt. Ryuuen hadn't actually been looking for an incriminating message on Class C's phones. Rather, he was evaluating how much the class feared him, and how much influence X had over the spy. And his conclusion was…

"I'm going to ask the spy to show himself again."

Ryuuen looked at each individual in the class, studying their body language.

"Are you scared of this mysterious X? Or are you scared of me? Which one should you truly fear? Are you sure you're not making a big mistake? Remember what happened after the entrance ceremony? You saw what terrible fate befalls those who oppose me. Right, Ishizaki?"

"Y-yes…"

Ishizaki started trembling. Albert, who stood quietly by Ryuuen's side, also reacted slightly. Both Ishizaki and Albert had resisted Ryuuen at first, but the violence he wielded had ultimately brought them to their knees.

"Violence is the most powerful force in the world. I will not yield to authority. Even if the school tries to expel me, I'll kill the traitor before they kick me out. Do you understand? If I end up getting expelled because of this, I will stomp the life out of the spy, like crushing a bug."

This wasn't former-president Horikita or current-president Nagumo's style of authority. Ryuuen wielded his insane violence like a sword.

"I'll welcome the traitor's confession even now. However, this is your last chance. If you step forward and honestly admit what you've done, I promise to forgive and forget. I also swear that I won't let your classmates harass you. As I said from the very start, if you believe in me, I'll raise us all to Class A. As long as you follow me, I will protect you."

Ryuuen stepped down from the podium, gazing over every one of his classmates.

"Do you understand what it means to make me angry?"

He looked them in the eye, one by one. Ryuuen stopped beside a female student, standing right in front of her. Of course, it wasn't

random. He'd been targeting her since the start.

"What's wrong? Can't look me in the eye?"

"Ah…ah…I…" Her breathing was ragged. She appeared so terrified that she seemed on the verge of tears.

"Heh. It's you, isn't it, Manabe? You're the traitor."

Most of the students were dumbfounded.

"Don't be afraid, Manabe. Although you didn't come forward and tell me, I knew you were the spy from the very beginning. You've looked sick, like it was written on your face. There was no way you could hide."

Ryuuen brushed aside Manabe's hair and caressed her face. Manabe began trembling.

"I-I'm…I'm sorry. I-I—"

"Don't worry. I forgive you. I will handle this with tolerance and magnanimity. Tell me about it, hmm? Tell me about who this X really is."

Ryuuen turned from Manabe Shiho, fixing his sharp gaze upon her friends, Yabu Nanami and Yamashita Saki.

4.2

After Ryuuen finished grilling everyone, he released Class C and cleared the room. Only Ryuuen himself, Ishizaki, Kaneda, Ibuki, and the three spies remained.

"Do you know who gave you instructions?"

Manabe and her friends denied it.

"Next question. Why did you betray Class C? Tell me."

"That's—"

"There's no point in hiding. If you choose to stay quiet right now, then tomorrow I won't treat you as classmates anymore. You'll all be treated like worms, forever."

Manabe and her friends had no choice but to tell the truth. "Do… do you know a girl named Karuizawa Kei, from Class D?"

"Just her name and face. She's Hirata's girl, isn't she?"

"She, um, well, she acts all tough, but…it seems she was bullied long ago."

"Oh?"

"Well, Karuizawa treated Rika horribly, so we thought we'd give her some payback…"

Manabe explained to Ryuuen what'd happened on the cruise ship. She told him the truth about everything, including how they were in the same group as Karuizawa, and about Karuizawa's past. The spies even told Ryuuen about what they'd done to Karuizawa.

Manabe said that she began spying because she'd received threats promising to expose her and her friends for what they did. If the truth came to light, Manabe and her friends would be suspended, or worse.

"I see. Well, it sounds like you've been having quite a wild time."

"What?" said Ibuki. "If they're being threatened by someone they don't know, that hardly seems 'wild.'"

"Come on, Ibuki. When humans are cornered, they become such

weak creatures." Ryuuen didn't chastise the spies any further. "Here's the big question. Was anyone else there while you were bullying Karuizawa?"

Manabe and her friends nodded. "At the time, Yukimura-kun and Ayanokouji-kun from Class D saw us."

"Someone sent us a picture after. It was a photo of us with Karuizawa."

"I see," said Ryuuen. "I expected that there was some kind of evidence. So, someone took your picture, huh? Where is it?"

"I-I deleted it. If someone saw it, then we…"

"I understand completely."

"So, that means it's either Yukimura-shi or Ayanokouji-shi, right?" said Kaneda, who'd been quietly listening.

"Hold on, Ryuuen. I don't know much about this Yukimura guy, but I can't really imagine that Ayanokouji is the one pulling the strings. Can you? I've met him, and I don't see him as the type."

"Well, I suppose that Yukimura does look a little suspicious. He seems pretty smart," added Ishizaki.

"Can we really say that for sure, though? Ayanokouji-shi is always with Horikita-shi, isn't he? Moreover, Ayanokouji-shi hid his athletic abilities until the sports festival. I think he's the more suspicious of the two," said Kaneda.

"I think they're both irrelevant. Ayanokouji is just quick on his feet, and Yukimura is only good at studying, right? The mastermind would need more than that."

"Who else could it be?"

"There are other capable people in Class D. People like Hirata."

"Him? I can't imagine he's this type of person."

Ryuuen wore a thin smile while his classmates talked on and on. Then, SLAM! He pounded his fist against the podium.

"Shut up."

A terrified silence enveloped the entire room.

"Did I ask for your opinions? I will find Class D's puppet master. You are nothing more than my pawns. Right now, the facts state that

only Yukimura or Ayanokouji could have taken that picture. However, concluding that one of them is the mastermind merely because of that? No. They, too, might be mere pawns acting under someone else's orders," said Ryuuen.

That was where things got complicated.

"But, Ryuuen-shi, shouldn't we be especially suspicious of Ayanokouji-shi?" Kaneda dared to speak up.

"I agree," said Ryuuen.

With regard to Ayanokouji, he had felt something was fishy from the beginning, primarily because of Ayanokouji's connection to Horikita Suzune. However, if Ayanokouji were the mastermind, and had been close to Horikita Suzune from the beginning, he would never have let her be hurt.

"So, you're saying that the real mastermind's hiding right under our noses? I find that hard to swallow."

The situation felt hopeless.

"How about we try using him?" said Ryuuen.

They'd come this far; it made sense to go further. Ryuuen made his next move and sent a text message.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Hasebe Haruka
CLASS:	First Year, Class D
STUDENT ID:	S01T004686
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	November 5th

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	D
INTELLIGENCE:	C+
DECISION MAKING:	C+
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	D
COOPERATIVENESS:	D

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

She has a slight attitude problem when dealing with those of a higher social standing. She's also a little too outspoken about the things she's good at and the things she's not, as well as what she likes and dislikes. She is focused. We hope she can further develop that aspect of herself, while also receiving a proper education which she can apply to a wide range of topics.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

This student has had many absences from physical education classes. I am attempting to guide her.

Chapter 5:
A Means of Escape

After homeroom began at 6 p.m., Chabashira-sensei left the classroom. Hirata, glancing sideways at the perplexed students, stood and went up to the podium. No more time for games. We were about to have a serious discussion.

"During homeroom today, I'd like to discuss our strategy for the short quiz tomorrow. I've received Chabashira-sensei's permission. First, Horikita-san, would you please come up?"

Horikita stood and went to Hirata. Some students probably felt it was weird to see the two in solidarity. Hirata had always welcomed a partnership with Horikita, but until now, she never took him up on the offer. Horikita had always fought alone.

The Swiss biologist A. Portmann said it best. He said that human beings are born physiologically premature. He argued that, from a zoological point of view, humans are born about a year early in comparison to other mammals' developmental states. When a human baby is born, its sensory organs are developed, but its motor skills are not. On the other hand, many large animals, like deer, are capable of moving on their own soon after birth.

Horikita might have been reborn, but she was still underdeveloped. However, she contained limitless possibilities. Perhaps she still felt conflicted, deep down. She was probably struggling. The best course of action would be for her to change and accept it.

I thought Horikita would immediately start discussing the final exam, but she didn't. "First, there's something I'd like to say. Please allow me to apologize."

Something appeared to have festered inside her heart for several weeks now. "My performance during the sports festival was disappointing. Though I act tough in front of you all, in the end, I didn't do anything for Class D. For that, I apologize."

Horikita bowed her head deeply. Naturally, this display shook many students. Onodera, who had become a little distant with Horikita

after the three-legged race, spoke up in response.

"B-but it's not like it's only your fault we lost, Horikita-san. Please, don't bow to us. You don't have to," she said.

"That's right, Suzune. I mean, Haruki and the Professor weren't really much help, either." Sudou's words were sad but true. Yamauchi and Sotomura shot vexed glares at him.

"Regardless of whether you win or lose, a humble attitude makes it easier to move on. But that's not what I'm talking about here. I contributed almost nothing to any area of the festival," said Horikita.

She looked over at Sudou for an instant. By giving him that look, she implied that the one thing she'd gained was becoming Sudou's ally. Sudou couldn't have missed that message. While he scratched his cheek in embarrassment, he smiled quietly.

"But now, I'm finished apologizing. Next, I'd like to use my energy to take on the upcoming short quiz. Unless we all come together as a class, we won't get through this challenge."

"I can understand that, but do you have a plan? Like, we don't even know how they choose the pairs yet."

"Actually, the partner selection process has already been made clear. If we handle things right, each student could feasibly end up with their ideal partner. Hirata-kun, if you would."

Hirata, now playing the role of Horikita's support, wrote out the rules on the blackboard.

Deciding How Pairs Are Formed:

After the school looks at the class as a whole, it will pair the highest-scoring and lowest-scoring students.

This process will continue with the second-highest and second-lowest-scoring students pairing up, and then the third-highest and lowest, and so on.

For example, the student with one hundred points will pair with the student with zero points. The student with ninety-nine points will pair with the student with one point.

"Simple, right?" Horikita said.

"Wh-whoa! You cracked the code, Horikita! Awesome!"

"It's fairly obvious. However, remember this: though students who earn lower grades will almost automatically partner with students with

higher grades, there are always exceptions. I'm going to explain a strategy that we can use to end up with reliable, appropriate pairs," said Horikita.

She walked to Hirata and faced the classroom. Horikita was shy about public speaking; it had to be taking all she had to keep facing forward.

"I'd like to have the students who worry about their grades partner up with high scorers. However, looking at our grades so far, the truth of the matter is that we can't cover everyone," said Horikita.

Eleven students had an average score of eighty points or higher. Only six students had an average of ninety points or more. Meanwhile, the number of students with an average of sixty points or below made up more than half the class. In other words, it would be impossible to pair every low-scoring student with a high-scoring counterpart.

Instead, therefore, Horikita aimed to create stability by forcing the top ten and bottom ten students into specific partnerships. Hirata listed the lowest-scoring students' names on the blackboard, one by one.

"Um, I don't really get it. What are we supposed to do?" asked Yamauchi.

"It's okay for the ten lowest-scoring students, whose names are written here, to simply score zero points on this test. Since your final grades won't reflect your scores, that'll do you no harm. Conversely, the ten highest-scoring students should definitely try to score eighty-five points or above. Similarly, we'll divide the remaining twenty students in the class into two groups of ten. The higher-scoring of those two groups should aim to score a maximum of eighty points, while the lower-scoring group only needs to score one point. By doing things this way, we automatically achieve a good balance in our pairings," said Horikita.

The important thing was to ensure that the students who scored zero points and those who scored one point weren't paired. We needed to ensure that the school partnered the students with the most significant differences in academic ability.

"I think this is a great plan." Hirata didn't dissent. He wanted to create a harmonious atmosphere.

Kouenji usually refused to participate in anything, but he didn't appear to either support or reject the plan. Actually, it was more like he didn't seem interested whatsoever. His social skills were even worse

than Horikita's, but for once, it didn't matter that he was up to his usual tricks. Kouenji had avoided the kind of results that would get him kicked out of school so far. However, this time, it was possible that you could still fail the final exam even if you got a perfect score, depending on how well your partner did.

That said, if we got Kouenji into a preselected pairing, he'd probably be fine. In other words, while he might not be interested, he basically seemed willing to cooperate. Actually, we didn't know how Kouenji would react, in some ways. He might be unpredictable.

"Do you have any objections, Kouenji-kun?"

"No. What a nonsensical question. Naturally, I fully grasp the situation." He rested his long legs across his desk and started combing his hair, like always.

"Then would it be appropriate for me to expect you to score eighty points or higher?"

"Well, I'm not too sure about that. Wouldn't that depend on the test's contents?"

"If you intentionally scored a zero, and got matched with one of the higher-scoring students, you'd destroy the balance we're trying to achieve. Do you understand that?"

The only thing to fear from this test was someone getting an irregular score. If an academically gifted student like Kouenji deliberately held back, he could throw off the class's balance. We needed to avoid having highly gifted students like Horikita and Kouenji paired together.

"I will consider the matter carefully, *girl*."

Even though Kouenji's response was suspicious, Horikita couldn't pursue the matter any further.

5.1

The day of the short quiz arrived, and though I expected us to start immediately, Chabashira-sensei had something to discuss first.

“We will begin shortly, but I’d like to say something. You nominated Class C as the class you wanted to attack for this test. Since there was no conflict with any other class, your nomination was approved,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“Did Classes A and B both nominate Class D, then?” It seemed we’d managed to overcome our first obstacle, and Horikita was relieved.

“Class C will attack Class D. They also had no competing nominations that conflicted with that decision.”

So, the battle was going to be Class D versus Class C, and Class B versus Class A.

“That’s an ideal match-up,” said Horikita.

“Seems that way.”

Sakayanagi had likely chosen Class A’s nomination. Katsuragi probably would’ve nominated Class D, as that would give Class A the highest chance of winning. You could sense that Katsuragi’s influence was on the decline.

Class C was our challenger, just as Horikita had hoped it would be.

“At any rate, you look like you’re doing quite well, Ike. Yamauchi, you usually have dark circles under your eyes right before you take a test. Did you happen to come up with some secret strategy?”

“Heh heh heh. Watch and learn, sensei.” Ike was completely self-confident, as expected. He hadn’t needed to study at all. He could just write down his name and turn in a blank sheet of paper. If he seriously tried to take this unique exam, it would only increase the risks we’d face.

Chabashira-sensei had to see what was happening. “Don’t do something you’ll regret later. It would be better if you took this quiz

seriously."

"Wh-what do you mean? This isn't going to have an effect on my grades, right?"

"Right. Your final grade won't reflect your score on this at all."

"In that case, I don't need a good score," said Ike.

"Sure. If things go the way you expect them to go, that is."

What Chabashira-sensei said stirred our class's anxiety. "Should we try to get good scores after all?" muttered Sudou.

"Don't get flustered. There are no problems with our plan," said Horikita.

Her calm, collected response managed to settle the students. Sudou regained his composure instantly. "Yeah. All I have to do is believe in Suzune."

Chabashira-sensei produced the quiz papers. "Well then, let's begin. I needn't remind you that no form of cheating is allowed. If someone gets caught cheating, then there will be no mercy."

The teacher handed stacks of paper to the students in the front row and had them pass the tests back. Because we had to keep the paper facedown until the test started, I immediately flipped mine upside down when I received it.

"Aren't you worried that you're wrong about how the pairs are selected?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Not at all. I'm confident that I'm right," said Horikita.

She was unfazed by what Chabashira-sensei said. Ike and the others could stand tall because of their leader's confidence.

Class D was changing.

"Begin." Chabashira-sensei gave the signal, and the test started.

I slowly turned the papers over. "Oh…"

I couldn't help but make a noise. I probably wasn't the only one who was surprised. Though we'd expected that the difficulty level would be rather low, it really was extremely easy. Even small children could have completed this test. Of course, there were a few difficult questions in there, but even someone like Ike could easily score around sixty or higher if he didn't panic.

It was a very tempting trap. If we'd gone rushing into this test thoughtlessly, it could have been a disaster. However, that was exactly why Horikita came up with her strategy.

5.2

The short quiz ended without incident. The results were announced the very next day. Class D had previously sat all its exams while lacking any kind of cohesion, but we were so united this time that it felt almost too good to be true.

"The best part is that it looks like I didn't need to get involved," I muttered. I really was grateful for that.

"Well, I will now announce the pairings for the final exam," said Chabashira-sensei.

The short quiz's results were as follows: Horikita Suzune and Sudou Ken, Hirata Yousuke and Yamauchi Haruki, Kushida Kikyou and Ike Kanji, Yukimura Teruhiko and Inogashira Kokoro.

The pairs were almost perfectly in line with what we'd predicted. My partner was…Satou Maya.

"God really does have a bad sense of humor."

How had it ended up like this? Satou noticed that she was paired with me, and looked in my direction with a smile. I raised my hand to let her know I'd noticed, too.

"It looks like Kouenji-kun acted just as we hoped he would this time."

Kouenji was partners with Okiya. It seemed he'd gotten a sufficiently high score. Well, he'd scored highly on every test thus far, so it was more like business as usual. Kouenji crossed his arms, grinned, and let out a laugh.

"The results indicate that some among you understood this short quiz's purpose," said Chabashira-sensei, sounding quite impressed as she glanced over the list of partners. "Students were to be paired based on the difference in points, with the highest scorer partnered with the lowest, and so on. If students had the same scores, the pairings would have been determined at random. It's probably not necessary for me to explain the system, but I thought I would anyway."

Knowing that we'd been right on the money was a relief. "There

don't appear to be any blatant problems with the pairings," I said to Horikita.

"Yeah. Everything's been going so smoothly it's almost scary. But the real challenge starts now. How will we come up with our exam questions, and how will we overcome the final? You're paired up with Satou-san. You should be fine."

I hadn't intentionally chosen Satou or anything. And I wasn't entirely safe—she might fail the exam. I needed to keep my scores high from this point onward.

"I'll hold study groups until the final exam to raise our class's average scores," Horikita said. "If Hirata-kun and Kushida-san agree, I'd like to hold two study sessions per day. There will be a two-hour session beginning at 4 p.m., right after classes end, until 6 p.m. The other two-hour session will be held from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. We'll each lead a session in turn. I'll be counting on you, Hirata-kun," said Horikita.

"Because of my club activities, I'll take the second study group. Let's all work together and do our best," Hirata replied.

Things were certainly moving forward.

Horikita and Hirata discussed the study sessions' format until they nailed down the finer details. Kushida would attend both sessions and adopt a unique role, tutoring the students who were worried about whether they could reach fifty points.

That being said, this plan wasn't free of problems. Compared to the first-semester study group, significantly more students wanted a tutor, and only three could handle being tutors. Naturally, the more students there were per teacher, the lower the quality of instruction would be. When lunch came, Horikita met with Hirata and Sudou.

"Dang it! Suzune's not leading the second group? There goes my motivation, man." Sudou couldn't attend the first session due to his club activities, and was clearly unhappy to miss Horikita. Then again, the old Sudou probably would've lashed out by now.

"No matter who's teaching, it'll bother me if you don't try. Okay?" said Horikita.

"Okay. We're a team, after all," he replied. Horikita had excellent control over the untamed stallion that was Sudou.

"Your efforts reflect on me," she added. "I'd appreciate it if you

understand that. Besides, I'll try to make appearances at the evening sessions as often as I can."

"Yeah! All right, I'm ready for this! I'm countin' on you, Hirata."

"Likewise. Let's do our best together, Sudou-kun."

"Excuse me, may I talk to you?" Miyake Akito asked, approaching Horikita. I hadn't ever really spoken to him before. He looked apologetic.

"What's the matter, Miyake-kun?" asked Horikita.

Miyake was with Hasebe, a beautiful girl who was a frequent topic of discussion amongst the boys. These two normally kept quiet and rarely interacted with anyone. It was unexpected for them to approach Horikita.

"Wait, you two are paired together for the final exam, right?" asked Hirata.

"Well, yes. We're partners, but we're equally good and bad at all the same subjects. We're a little nervous about how we'll perform in the final, so we wanted to ask for your advice."

Miyake handed Hirata their completed answer sheets for both the short test and the midterm. Their scores on the short test stood in stark contrast, with Miyake getting seventy-nine points and Hasebe getting one point, as intended. However, their midterm scores were sixty-five and sixty-three, respectively. There was almost no difference in academic ability between them. They were both exceptionally average, but they'd still been split between the upper and lower groups.

At first glance, it looked as though they could probably score high enough to pass the final, but there was a problem. Miyaki and Hasebe got the exact same kinds of questions wrong. To pass, they needed a score of at least sixty points for every subject. This would be a perilous bridge to cross.

"I see," said Hirata. "This is a little unexpected. Let's make sure to check the other pairs later."

"I'm sorry to bother you, Hirata, really," replied Miyake. "I'm always causing trouble for you, between the cruise ship and the sports festival."

That made me think back to the sports festival. Miyake withdrew from the final relay because he hurt his leg. It looked like he moved

without any problems now, so his injury must have completely healed.

"Please, don't apologize," said Hirata. "If I had trouble, I'm sure you'd do the same for me."

The answers that Miyake and Hasebe got right and wrong on their sheets were extraordinarily similar. In fact, they were so similar you might think the same person took both tests.

"This is really unfortunate," added Miyake. "I don't want to complicate your plans or mess up the study groups."

You could tell that the two were by no means unintelligent. The problem was that they were too similar. Because of that, group tutoring was going to be insufficient. One-on-one tutoring was necessary.

"Kushida-san, could I ask you to take on additional students? These two should have a pretty strong foundation that won't bring down the group's overall cohesion," said Horikita.

"Sure," replied Kushida. "If you're all right with that, Miyake-kun and Hasebe-san, I'll do it."

Miyake didn't appear to accept or reject Kushida's offer, but Hasebe spoke up. "I'm going to pass, I think. I don't get along too well with Ichihashi-san and the others." Fortunately, Ichihashi and the other girls weren't in the classroom and didn't hear that remark. "Besides, I'm not really good at studying in a group with a lot of people."

It seemed Miyake was the one who had wanted to come to Hirata for help, while Hasebe hadn't been too keen on it.

"But if you take the final exam as is, even if you clear the overall score requirement, you might score under sixty points somewhere," Horikita said.

"Yeah, I know," replied Hasebe. She averted her eyes from Horikita and started walking away.

"Where are you going?"

"Miyacchi, I'm sorry to have wasted your time, but I guess this just isn't the right fit for me," said Hasebe. With that, she left the classroom.

"Sorry, Horikita," Miyake muttered.

"I don't mind. Well, even if it's just you, would you mind studying with Kushida-san?" asked Horikita. If Miyake improved his weakest

subjects, he could effectively cover for Hasebe, too.

"I'll pass. I don't really feel like I could study with a group of just girls. I'll try and do it on my own," he replied. He got up, grabbed his bag, and left.

Horikita couldn't force anyone to study. If a student didn't participate of their own free will, it would be nearly impossible to get any results. It would probably lower the serious students' morale to boot.

"What now?" asked Hirata. "I think we should follow up with those two."

"Yeah. If only we had another tutor," said Horikita.

She glanced at me, so with my own eyes, I sent her a message saying "absolutely not." Putting aside whether I could even do the tutoring, I wasn't sure I could communicate with Miyake and Hasebe.

"I'll see if I can make time," Horikita muttered.

"I don't think that's a good idea. You'll overwork yourself. If you do that, you won't be an effective tutor. Besides, Horikita-san, you also have to create Class C's test problems," said Hirata.

"But what other choice do I have?"

"In that case, I'll take care of tutoring them," said Yukimura, inserting himself casually into our conversation.

"We'd be glad to have you aboard, Yukimura-kun. You're diligent and academically gifted. But are you all right with this? I thought you didn't really like this kind of thing?"

"If I don't help out where I can, we won't be able to pass the test," Yukimura said. "Same goes for you, Horikita. You can't do everything yourself. There's just one problem. I can teach Miyake and Hasebe how to study, but I'm not friendly with them. After seeing what happened here earlier, I get the feeling that talking to them will be tricky. I was hoping you could do the work of convincing them to study with me."

That was a small price to pay, under the circumstances. Horikita was overjoyed. Yukimura was like the cavalry in a movie—the sort who arrives in the nick of time, charging over the hill to save the cornered protagonists.

"I'll think of something," Horikita promised. Yukimura left the

classroom, and she turned to me. “Is it okay to be optimistic for now?”

“Not necessarily. You don’t know how to talk to those two, either,” I told her.

“Hirata-kun, do you think Miyake and Hasebe will listen to Yukimura-kun?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. All three of them are loners,” said Hirata.

Horikita turned to me after a moment of thought. “Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Would you manage Yukimura-kun and the others?”

“Manage?”

“You were Yukimura-kun’s roommate on the cruise ship, so I thought you might have broken the ice with him. Miyake-kun and Hasebe-san could be difficult, but with you as the middleman, I think it’ll be easier for us to communicate with them,” said Horikita.

Well, it was probably as good a plan as we had. Still, why me? I’d been happy not getting involved for once.

“All you need to do is help corral them into studying with Yukimura. I didn’t say I wanted you to teach them.” Although that was true, just managing Miyake and Hasebe likely wouldn’t be an easy task. “Can I count on you?” Horikita asked.

Her request was morphing into a threat. All I could do was nod. I just didn’t want to have to do anything truly exhausting, like tutoring or preparing test questions.

“I’ll do what I can.” I sighed, but made sure that Horikita didn’t notice.

5.3

I started preparing immediately. I spoke to Yukimura, then got in touch with Miyake. We talked about holding a study session later. Unfortunately, it wasn't going to be so easy.

As soon as class ended, Hasebe vanished from the room. "Huh? Where's Hasebe?"

"Did she run away?" muttered Yukimura.

"Hasebe isn't like that," said Miyake. "Maybe she just went on ahead of us?"

"Why would she need to?"

"A bunch of different reasons." Miyake seemed to understand Hasebe quite well, and wasn't especially worried.

We decided to head toward Pallet, our designated study hangout. En route to the café, we saw Hasebe in the hallway.

"Why did you rush out?" pressed Yukimura.

"What? Maybe I just don't like standing around. Hanging out in a group is a little awkward," she replied.

Yukimura seemed to take this as a personal attack. "So, you hate being seen talking to us?" he asked.

"That's not it at all. There are a lot of reasons."

"Don't sweat it, Yukimura. Hasebe's just like this," said Miyake.

"Well, all the seats at Pallet will probably be taken while we stand around talking. Let's keep moving," I suggested. I understood how Yukimura felt, but we needed to stay on target.

"Yeah, you're right. Let's go," replied Yukimura, regaining his composure and taking the lead.

"You should be a little more careful about what you say," Miyake told Hasebe.

"Was it that annoying? I'll think about it, I guess," she replied.

We managed to secure four seats at Pallet. Yukimura sat next to me, while Hasebe sat across from us. Miyake was beside Hasebe. The four of us clearly felt incredibly uncomfortable and out of place.

"Um, I guess I'm counting on you, or whatever," said Hasebe.

"Well, if you have any questions, feel free to ask," I told everyone.

Hasebe raised her hand. "So, you *can* talk, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Is that really the question you're going to ask?"

Hasebe looked as if her interest was piqued. "I guess I don't have any impression of you at all. Do people even notice when you're not there?" she continued.

Well…I mean, I didn't talk to Hasebe on a regular basis, or at all. So, maybe it was understandable that she had that kind of impression.

Miyake brought up the sports festival. "But Ayanokouji was awesome in the relay."

"Seems that way. But I went to the bathroom during that race, so I missed seeing it. It all feels kinda bizarre to me. Didn't you compete against the former student council president? That's what everyone was buzzing about right after the festival ended," said Hasebe.

"Did you do track and field back in junior high, Ayanokouji? After seeing you run, a talent scout from the track and field club came looking for you," said Miyake.

"Ah, yeah. I got some offers. But I refused," I replied. The track and field club's enthusiasm was only temporary. They couldn't keep trying to recruit me forever. The people in the club probably weren't talking about me anymore. "To be honest, I've never been in a club before. I don't really know much about that stuff."

"Oh, really? What a shame," said Miyake.

Yukimura just listened, never speaking once. Hasebe, disinterested, switched the conversation's topic to Miyake. "Miyacchi is in the archery club. Is it fun shooting bows every day?"

"I wouldn't do it if it wasn't fun. By the way, you don't shoot the bow, just arrows," he replied.

"I'm just not interested in clubs, I guess. I'm fine with spending time by myself," said Hasebe.

My current impression of these two was quite different from what I'd previously imagined. They were far more talkative than I thought.

"Hey, Miyacchi. Is it okay for you to miss your club stuff?" asked Hasebe.

"I took time off."

"Wow. You shouldn't do that."

"When something takes priority, I focus on it. Besides, my club's pretty lenient."

"Excuse me? I'd like to say something before we begin," said Yukimura. Finally, he'd spoken up. He focused not on Miyake or Hasebe, but on me. "No hiding anything, Ayanokouji."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Studying. Horikita says you're quite capable."

"Ugh, Horikita," I muttered. What a blabbermouth. I needed to give Yukimura something if I wanted to earn his trust. "Well, I'm relatively good at memorizing things. I think I can get a pretty high score if I concentrate."

"Are you the type to hide his abilities?"

"Well, I can't hold a candle to you, Yukimura. Please don't expect too much of me. I'm not very good at teaching," I replied.

"You should take this study group seriously, then. With me tutoring you, you'll definitely score higher than you did on the midterm." Yukimura turned to Hasebe and Miyake. "Did you bring your answer sheets from the midterm and first semester exams like I asked?"

"Yeah," said Hasebe.

Miyake nodded as well. They took their test papers from their bags and handed them over. I glanced at their papers and scores.

"Both of you excel in the sciences. Your humanities scores are a complete disaster," said Yukimura.

Miyake and Hasebe had scored relatively high in math, earning around seventy points. But they only got about forty points in language and world history. It was obvious why the two of them were worried.

"I didn't know you two were so close," added Yukimura.

"Well, Hasebe came and talked to me when I was studying in the

library one day," said Miyake.

"Miyacchi and I are both independent people. We don't really fit in with everyone else," Hasebe added.

"I feel the same, in a way," said Miyake. "Even in *this* group, I feel awkward and distant."

"So, why did you agree to join us?" asked Yukimura.

"Because this isn't really a club, I guess. It's just a study group. Besides, it'll be quiet, right? When I study by myself, nothing bothers me or gets in the way."

Suddenly, I felt as if someone was watching me. I turned around. Several male students, each on the phone with somebody, were in fact eyeing us. I recognized three of them; all were from Class C. I only recalled the name of the one in the middle, Ishizaki.

Hopefully, they weren't about to drag me into another troublesome mess. It didn't seem like Ishizaki and the others were picking a fight. Although they looked at me now and again, they walked over to the display case next to the register. The case was lined with various cakes, which you could either order to go or enjoy there in the café. The strawberry shortcake and blancmange appeared especially popular, but I wasn't exactly knowledgeable about that stuff.

The cashier seemed to be having some difficulty hearing what the Class C students wanted to order. Before long, she looked anxious and apologetic.

"There's no way you can do it?!" roared Ishizaki. The lively café quieted at once.

"Sir, we need to have at least one week's advance notice for any special-order cakes," the cashier replied. "I'm afraid it's not possible to prepare something on the same day."

After hearing the cashier's response, people began chatting in the café once again.

"What's that all about?" asked Hasebe. She twirled her pen around and looked at Ishizaki and his friends with disgust.

"Who knows? Doesn't have anything to do with us," replied Yukimura. He was writing something down on Hasebe and Miyake's test papers, probably figuring out which subjects they were having trouble in and coming up with a plan.

“Cake, huh?” I wasn’t the least bit interested in what Ishizaki was talking to the cashier about, but the topic of cake reminded me that it was my birthday tomorrow. Honestly, I didn’t know how to spend a birthday like a normal person. My birthday always meant that I was simply another year older.

I knew that a birthday was often celebrated with family, a lover, or friends. I just didn’t understand what I should feel.

“What’s the matter, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Nothing.”

Tomorrow was October 20. Some other students or teachers might share my birthday. The only difference between those people and me was that I didn’t have anybody to celebrate with. I wondered whether someone would acknowledge my birthday next year.

5.4

"I'm going to get another coffee," said Hasebe.

"Me too," said Miyake. More than thirty minutes had passed, and Yukimura still hadn't looked up from their papers.

Hasebe and Miyake went to the counter with their empty cups. Pallet had a policy that, if you brought your receipt, you could get another cup for half price. The coffee was inexpensive and delicious, and the café offered the perfect amount, so it was becoming quite popular amongst the first-year students. Hasebe and Miyake were already on their third cups. Yukimura, still focused, had half of his first coffee remaining.

"Seems like hard work," I said.

"I've never really taught someone else how to study before. I mean, a long time ago, I taught this one junior-high

idiot to pull an all-nighter, but I couldn't stand it. I wasn't able to concentrate on the material, because he didn't have the fundamentals down," said Yukimura.

He briefly set down his pen and looked up at the ceiling.

"Even now, I can't forget the time I wasted. I thought it was so stupid, trying to teach people how to study. When you and Horikita rounded up those guys who were about to fail, and held those study sessions, honestly, I was laughing at you. The same goes for Hirata's group. I mean, doesn't it seem like a waste? Nearly everyone who hates studying just can't study in the first place. I felt like teaching them to cram for a couple days was useless, since they'd just go back to how they were before."

"So, why did you decide to help tutor?" I asked. This test was unlike anything in junior high. Yukimura was taking on some significant responsibility. If Hasebe and Miyake did get expelled, he might blame himself. That was the kind of person he was.

"I was useless in the sports festival. I got tripped up by the thing I dismissed as unimportant. Just being able to study isn't enough for this school. Just being athletic isn't enough. If you combine those two

things, that *still* isn't enough. Even people like Horikita and Hirata, who are gifted both academically and athletically, definitely can't make it through the challenges ahead with just those skills alone. Intuition, insight, and taste. We have to rely on those traits, which are essential for living in society. Working as a team is vital. That's the only way we win," said Yukimura. "So, I decided to help. Also, I was self-centered. I thought I'd be fine as long as I could study. All I worried about was myself. I was just like my selfish mother. That's why I took a good hard look at myself, and… Ah, that's not important. Forget it."

He looked down. "If I had to tutor Ike and the other guys, I'd probably have a much worse time of it. Miyake and Hasebe both take their studies seriously, so it might be easy. Besides, they're already good at science. It shouldn't be too hard to cover the rest. I don't know much I'll be able to help, but we'll probably see at least some improvement."

Such positive thinking. Well, Yukimura probably realized that this was where he could do the most good.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I said.

Hasebe and Miyake hadn't returned. Since it seemed like it'd be a little while yet before our study session started, I got up to leave.

The real reason was that I felt Ishizaki and his friends gazing at me.

Also…I felt someone else's presence. Someone was secretly watching me, so I walked straight over and sat next to my new stalker. She didn't seem to notice me stroll up.

"What are you doing out here, Sakura?" I asked.

"Hyaaah?!" Sakura practically jumped out of her seat in fear. "I-It's just a coincidence, Ayanokouji-kun!"

"A coincidence, huh?"

"Yes, a coincidence."

"Well, I thought you were looking over at me from time to time."

"Well, that's… I mean… I'm sorry." Sakura immediately apologized.

"Is there anything you want to talk to me about?" If it wasn't urgent, she could just have called or sent an email. She wasn't the type to hang out at Pallet with friends. "Did you want to join the study

group?"

"Wh-wh-why do you say that?!"

"Well, I see study materials in your bag." That was odd, because Sakura would never choose to study in such a crowded place.

"Ah…um!" Sakura panicked and tried to close her bag, but it was too late. The way she was acting screamed that she wanted to participate.

"Well, why not sit with us? I'll ask everyone else."

"B-but I…I've hardly ever spoken to them before." Sakura wasn't good at interacting with people. I understood that much.

"Well, you probably came here for a specific reason. I mean, the Sakura I know likely wouldn't come all the way to Pallet and risk bumping into people pointlessly," I told her.

Being in public still wasn't easy for Sakura. She'd probably been tempted to leave or run back to her dorm, but managed to keep herself here. That meant something was going on in her mind.

"Well, you decide, Sakura. It's not totally up to me. We have to consider how Yukimura, Hasebe, and Miyake would feel," I said.

Sakura might be dejected to hear me say that, but her passivity could be bad for her. If I wanted her to step up and grow, the best plan of action was to keep my distance and watch over her. Then again, I felt as though communicating with Miyake and Hasebe was relatively easy, compared to the rest of our classmates. I'm sure Sakura felt the same.

"It's okay if you want to think about it. We'll probably be here for another hour," I told her.

Though it might have been a little cold of me, I left Sakura and returned to my seat. Yukimura glanced at me and said nothing. After about two minutes, Miyake and Hasebe returned.

"Did you finish checking everything?" Miyake asked.

"Just a little longer," replied Yukimura.

"Ah, that reminds me. There's something I want to ask you, Ayanokouji-kun," said Hasebe.

"Knock it off, Hasebe," said Miyake. Well, this sounded ominous.

"Come on, it's fine. It's not like it's the end of the world if

someone hears," said Hasebe.

"That's not the problem. There's a time and place for this," he replied.

Very ominous.

"Well, classes are done for the day. Isn't right now the absolute best time to talk?" Hasebe countered.

Miyake shook his head, as if he didn't know what to do. What in the world was Hasebe up to?

"Ayanokouji-kun, are you going out with Horikita-san?" she asked.

"Nope."

"Whoa. Not even a pause to think about it? I'd say it sounded like that answer was pretty well-rehearsed. Kinda suspicious, don't you think?"

"Several people already asked, that's why. It's not like Horikita and I are always together or anything," I answered.

"I suppose. But you know what they say—rumors about love are half truths, half lies."

For a solitary girl, Hasebe really seemed interested in romance. I suppose a sensible man in this situation would see whether Hasebe had a boyfriend. Of course, I wasn't going to do that.

"Okay." Yukimura suddenly lifted his head. It seemed he'd finished checking everything. "I feel like I've figured out where you two struggle. I'd like to propose a detailed study plan."

He handed Miyake the test papers, his comments written in the margins.

"I tried coming up with some sample questions for you to solve. I'll have Hasebe work on the same problems later, so don't write your answers directly into my notebook. The time limit is ten minutes. There are ten questions in total," said Yukimura.

Miyake took the notebook. After he'd struggled for ten minutes, he passed it to Hasebe so she could do the same.

When the twenty-minute testing period ended, Yukimura immediately began writing down their scores.

“Seriously, you two…”

He returned their answer sheets, letting out an exasperated sigh. Miyake and Hasebe had each gotten only three answers correct and six incorrect, and each scored half points on one question. What was really surprising was that they managed to get the exact same questions right and wrong.

“You don’t just have similar strengths. You also tend to memorize things in exactly the same way,” said Yukimura.

“Wow! Doesn’t it feel as if this is kind of like fate, Miyacchi?” Hasebe asked.

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Oh, come on. You never play along. But, uh, isn’t this kind of a problem?” she asked Yukimura.

“Actually, this situation is convenient. It’ll only take half the effort to solve.”

If Hasebe and Miyake’s academic skills and tendencies were that much in sync, then Yukimura could basically think of it as actually teaching one person. Of course, there’d be at least a few minor differences between them, but everything would proceed more smoothly than expected.

“Do you think this is going to be easy?” Mikaye asked.

“Well, that depends on how much effort you’ll put in. Even though the questions I came up with were kind of basic, your scores weren’t good. I’d like us to meet up seven or eight times before the final. Rather than tutoring constantly, it’ll be good to give you some time for self-study, too. Are you three okay with that? Miyake, you might have conflicts with club activities, right?”

“Since the final exam is getting closer, we’ll probably take a break from club activities, but let me ask for the time off,” replied Miyake.

Yukimura nodded. That just left Hasebe.

“Okay, so let me just ask one thing,” she said. “Won’t this just feel like typical studying? I mean, I don’t like studying or anything, but if this is just reviewing stuff, I think I can do it on my own. So, how does a group help? Obviously, I understand that having a smart person tutor me is good and all. But I came here because Miyacchi recommended it, and I’m still on the fence.”

“This isn’t a normal study group. If this were a regular test, the school would prepare the questions. But this time, another class will write them. These questions won’t be standardized and easy to study for. With other students making problems, there are unknown variables. It’ll be difficult to anticipate them. That’s exactly why studying’s necessary,” said Yukimura.

Miyake was convinced. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m sure Class C will try to trip us up.”

“Yeah,” Yukimura said. “Well, the questions might seem impossible for us to imagine right now, but what if we identify the people coming up with them? Personally, I think Kaneda will do it.”

I’d heard that name before.

“He’s that one creepy weirdo with the glasses, right?” asked Hasebe.

“I don’t know if I’d put it like that, but yeah. He’s the best student in Class C,” said Yukimura. It was reasonable to assume that the best student would make the questions.

“But if Class C is trying to trick us, won’t Ryuuen or maybe Ishizaki come up with some, too?”

“No way. Without a thorough understanding of the subject, they won’t be able to come up with anything. Take you two, for example. Think about subjects you’re poor at, like the humanities. Do you really think you’d be able to create a tricky question?” asked Yukimura.

“No. I wouldn’t even be able to *think* of a question.”

“Yeah. Besides, what kind of social studies problems would even *be* on the test?”

“Exactly. At best, you’d think of the most obvious problems. Even if you scoured the textbook for the really difficult parts, if you didn’t establish the problem properly, the school would probably turn it down,” said Yukimura.

“It’s ultimately up to the school to decide whether to use a question, right?” I interjected.

“True,” said Yukimura.

“So, if Class D deliberately submits a number of extreme questions that border on going too far, that would give us a better sense of what’s

acceptable?" I asked.

"That's certainly a good idea," said Miyake.

"You're really smart, Ayanokouji-kun," said Hasebe.

"We'll probably need to come up with provisional questions as soon as possible so we can identify the school's standards. I'll try to create questions myself, but would Horikita and Hirata be willing to help out?" Yukimura asked.

"I dunno. I'm just spitballing here."

"You're the only person who can get in touch with them, Ayanokouji," Yukimura said. Miyake and Hasebe nodded.

"Well, I'll do whatever I can. Just don't expect too much of me," I replied. Did Horikita and Yukimura both intend to make me their middleman?

"Yeah. Okay." Hasebe smiled, her doubts about the study group gone. "Well, I'm not in any clubs, so I'm good. Let's decide when to meet based on what works for Miyacchi."

Miyake looked over at Hasebe in surprise. "I thought you were going to back out, Hasebe. This is unusual. You don't normally want to get involved in anything."

"If it were just me getting expelled, I wouldn't care. But I don't want to drag you down with me, Miyacchi. You know?"

"Well, I suppose this is enough for today. The first study session is the day after tomorrow." Yukimura brought things to a close.

As we got up to leave, I realized Sakura still hadn't come over to talk to us.

5.5

After I returned to my dorm, I immediately contacted Horikita for instructions.

"This is good. We'll definitely want to test the school," she said. "Hirata and I are already making progress coming up with questions, but I'd like to know just how far we can go. I'm glad that everything seems to be going well, but are we really sure that Kaneda-kun will be the person in Class C creating questions?"

"There's no way to be sure," I replied. "But trying to anticipate the kinds of questions Kaneda would come up with is certainly one way we can handle these study sessions."

"I suppose. If we imagine that this test will be full of difficult questions, we might need to try to get eighty or ninety points," said Horikita. "By the way, how did the study group go?"

I told her what had happened, though I did exaggerate a little. I tried to make it sound as though I'd managed to make friends. Horikita didn't touch on that subject at all. She only cared about Hasebe and Miyake's academic abilities.

"It's quite the coincidence," she mused.

"I know, right? For the time being, I'll see what I can do. They seem easy enough to supervise, anyway," I said.

"Thank you. Also, there's one more thing. On the days when Yukimura-kun's study group doesn't meet, would you please come to mine?"

"That's not what we agreed."

"You don't have to tutor. I just want you to manage everyone," Horikita replied.

The word "manage" was vague, so vague that I had absolutely no clue what she meant. I understood it as much as I understood the expression "more than friends, less than lovers." Which was to say, not at all.

"What do you mean, 'manage'?" I asked.

She sighed heavily.

“Too many people need tutoring, compared to the number who can teach. I can’t keep my eye on everyone, no matter how hard I try. I’d like you to make sure everybody studies properly,” said Horikita.

“The teachers manage to teach dozens of students all by themselves, right?”

“At the risk of sounding self-aggrandizing, it’s not as though even our teachers can watch everyone by themselves. That’s why you have some students, like Ike-kun, who fall behind. Even if they fool the teacher into thinking they understood, in the end, they struggle to keep up,” said Horikita. “Yukimura-kun isn’t accustomed to tutoring, and I’m having trouble with the sheer number of people I have to teach. Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun are especially problematic. They have shorter attention spans than a kindergartener. Any objections?”

“None.”

“Excellent.”

“It’s okay if I don’t go to the night sessions, right?”

“That’s fine. The nighttime study sessions are significantly better than the daytime ones, anyway, though some of the girls in that group can be troublesome,” said Horikita.

I guessed that some girls only showed up at the sessions to be around Hirata and didn’t mind that Karuizawa was there. That had to be an interesting dynamic.

I realized that Horikita didn’t mention Sudou among those causing issues. “Has Sudou been behaving?”

“Yes. He’s taking this seriously, though he still hasn’t reached junior high level yet.”

“I’m counting on you.” I still didn’t have a good feeling about this. “Oh, yeah. While we’re on the subject of the study groups, what about Kushida?”

“What do you mean?”

“Has nothing changed with her?”

“Of course not. I do think that she’ll help. She also promised to attend the study sessions every day,” said Horikita.

I supposed that, as far as Horikita was concerned, there wasn’t

much to worry over. After all, it was just the very first day of the study sessions. From my point of view, though, we simply couldn't kick back and casually watch this problem develop.

"Have you started creating test questions?"

"Of course I have. Mine, Hirata-kun's, and Yukimura-kun's will form the fundamental basis. I wanted more people to help, but the more classmates I involve, the greater the risk that the problems will leak to Class C," said Horikita.

"It'd certainly be difficult to rule out any possibility of leaks if we factored in Kushida. Wait, aren't you and her both participating in the evening study sessions?"

"Yes, but as long as we don't ask for her help with the test questions, it should be okay."

This was pure speculation on both our parts. "Our test questions and answers are Class D's lifeline. If that information leaks, we're doomed," I said.

"I'll keep things locked down. But that alone won't solve the issue, will it?"

"I'm not worried about the 'creating questions' part. If anything, I fear what comes after we submit them to the school. If you give the final questions and answers to Chabashira-sensei the day before the test, then they'll be out there, ready to be stolen," I told Horikita.

Kushida had employed a similar tactic with the participation table during the sports festival. It was more than likely that Ryuuen would make a similar request of her again.

"So, the only way we can deal with this is by talking it out with Kushida," said Horikita.

"But what do we do if she leaks our questions to Class C?" I countered.

"I don't want to think about it," she said.

"You have to. This is about all of Class D. No matter how much we study, if our opponents get a hundred points across the board, we have no hope of winning," I told her. If Class C memorized all our answers, defeat was certain.

"I see what you're saying. But I'm dealing with it. It's already past

ten o'clock. I'd like to come up with at least one more question before I go to bed."

She hung up. My phone's battery was low, so I plugged it in to charge.

Horikita said she was working on countermeasures, but I didn't know how well they'd go. I wasn't criticizing her strategy to persuade Kushida directly, but rather, didn't have much to say about it. If I had to bring Kushida over to my side, I'd threaten her like Karuizawa. No—I'd probably need to do something far worse to make Kushida surrender to me. However, I didn't know the details of Kushida's past, and she might not fold under pressure.

"What should I do?" I muttered.

Then, I received an email from Ryuuen.

After the sports festival, I'd asked Manabe and her friends for Ryuuen's email address and sent him a message. I hadn't received a response until now.

What are you?

That was the entire message. I wasn't nice enough to answer him, and besides, he couldn't trace my email. It was a dummy account.

I decided to go to sleep.

5.6

The library bustled after classes ended, absolutely full of students. Although it was crowded, it was quiet. Most students were completely immersed in studying.

“Wow. So, this is the library, huh?” muttered Satou. She sounded interested.

Ah, yes. That brought me to my own little problem. Satou had decided to join the study session. I hadn’t spoken to her since we exchanged contact information. This was extremely awkward.

“This is my first time here. What about you, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“I’ve been a few times,” I replied.

“You’re so studious!”

“Well, it’s more like I come here to kill time.”

“You come to the *library* to kill time? That’s strange.”

Apparently, my pretty-generic answer was weird. I had no idea what to think. I just didn’t know what Satou was trying to do.

“Hey, um, Ayanokouji-kun… I’m not a bother, am I?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I *did* just suddenly tell you I was joining the study session and all.”

“I don’t mind. Horikita and Kushida are the ones tutoring, and they should be happy to have more people.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Satou looked a little depressed. Being in the library was kind of annoying; I had to whisper to avoid bothering other students, and as a result, got far closer to Satou than I normally would’ve. I could practically feel her breath on my skin.

Was this a youthful moment of hedonism? If so, youth was kind of a pain in the butt. I wasn’t enjoying this in the slightest. I was nervous and worried about Satou.

I basically just wanted to go home.

But…did I really?

I tried to examine my current situation. I could certainly grow perplexed when faced with the unknown. From my perspective as a nobody, I was always prepared for immediate rejection.

But hadn't I come to this school because I was looking for something other than routine?

"Wow. Everyone looks so serious," said Satou. "They're really studying."

"The library's a pretty normal place to study, actually," Horikita replied, appearing out of nowhere.

I regained my composure and cleared my mind. I wanted to get through this study session.

"Okay, you guys," Horikita said to Ike and Yamauchi. "No commotion tonight, okay? Next time you make a scene, there's a chance they'll kick you out of the library."

"Y-yeah, we know already. Sheesh."

Horikita went to secure us seats. Even though more than half the chairs were vacant, that didn't necessarily mean that they were free. It was an unspoken rule that the seats near the café window and next to the library drinks station were for senior students only. In this territorial division, first-year students were only allowed to use the noisy area near the entrance.

However, we had an additional concern this time. We wanted to avoid being near Class C students as much as possible.

"What are you doing, Horikita?" I asked.

"If it's the thing you're concerned about, Ayanokouji-kun, don't worry. I'm already dealing with it."

Directly ahead of us, Ichinose Honami—a Class B girl—entered the first-year students' area. She waved, inviting us to come talk to her. Eight other Class B students, four guys and four girls, hung around Ichinose. I glanced over at Horikita. Judging by her expression, she wasn't perturbed by this. Ichinose approached us.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," said Horikita.

"Oh no, not at all. We just got here ourselves," said Ichinose.

“I met with Ichinose-san yesterday and suggested we form a joint study group. Since we aren’t competing against Class B in this exam, I thought we could help each other,” said Horikita.

Well. Every silver lining has a cloud, as they say. Ike and Yamauchi, who’d managed to keep calm up until now, suddenly jumped.

“Ike-kun, I warned you, didn’t I?” Horikita grabbed Ike’s arm. He locked up in terror, like a frog being glared at by a snake. Why had he and Yamauchi suddenly become so excited? I supposed getting together with Class B girls was appropriately stimulating.

“Ayanokouji-kun, you came, too!” said Ichinose.

“I was pretty close to failing. I might need your help,” I replied.

“Oh no, I’m sure I’m the one who needs help,” she said.

Even though the library was a quiet space, you could still hold a conversation. Because Ichinose managed to secure us some corner seats, the music playing throughout the library completely drowned out our low voices. The music was Beethoven’s Symphony No. 6, “Pastoral.” It was something I could relax to; a pretty good choice.

To think Horikita had actually formed a joint study group. Assuming that we were able to work together with Class B, this would likely help us. The more varied perspectives, the more creative test questions.

However, we were also taking certain risks. If any Class B students had ties to Class C, our information might leak. Of course, Horikita already understood that. She probably chose to bring us together because the benefits outweighed the risks.

“Sit here, Ayanokouji-kun.” Satou urged me to sit beside her, so I did.

“Yeah, sure.”

“What’s going on, Satou? You’re sitting awfully close to Ayanokouji-kun.”

“It’s only natural, isn’t it? Since we’re partners.”

I took out my textbook and notes right away. Even if it was just for show, I probably still needed to study.

“Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, what would be the best way for *me* to

prepare?" asked Satou.

"You should ask Horikita," I replied.

"But this is a good opportunity, isn't it? You're partners, after all. Why don't you take care of Satou-san, Ayanokouji-kun?" drawled Horikita.

"My test scores are only slightly different from Satou's, so there's probably not that much I can teach her. Besides, I wanted to get some tutoring myself."

"I see. In that case, I'll tutor you both," said Ichinose.

"Let's do our best together, Ayanokouji-kun," said Satou.

"Y-yeah." I was starting to feel pretty anxious about this study group.

"You're always so calm, Ayanokouji-kun. You just have this really mature vibe. What were you like back in junior high?" Satou drew closer to me, looking into my eyes. Her uniform was slightly unbuttoned, and I caught a glimpse of her cleavage. I wasn't sure whether she noticed, but her breathing was a little heavy.

"I guess pretty normal. I didn't particularly stand out. Not very different from now. Maybe that's why people say I'm gloomy." I tried to inch away.

It was fine if Satou had a crush on me, but people were staring at us right now, and I hated it. Ike and Yamauchi, in particular, glared incredulously at me.

"You're not gloomy at all, Ayanokouji-kun. I think you're cool," said Satou.

"I don't think 'cool' applies to me," I said.

"Really? Well, I don't know about other people, but that's what *I* think."

No matter what I said, Satou interpreted it as interesting. I needed an escape plan. "Okay, how about we find out what our weaknesses are? Did you bring your midterm with you?"

"I did."

She took some crumpled-up test papers out of her bag. She'd scored around fifty points across the board in every test. Although she'd answered simple questions correctly, anything of medium difficulty or

higher was disastrous. It was actually a mystery to me how Satou managed to stay in this school for this long.

“It’s kind of bad, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Yeah…a little. Since we seem to be about the same level, we should study together.”

“Yes!” Satou looked incredibly excited, but I wished she wasn’t so loud.

“Aren’t you two getting along a little too well?” asked Ike, his eyes full of suspicion.

“We’re partners. It’s only natural, right?” replied Satou.

“Ike, why don’t you study, rather than concentrate on things you don’t understand?” said Horikita, evidently not caring who got along with whom.

“Tch. Yeah, yeah. I know.”

Ike’s discipline. The gift that kept on giving.

5.7

Our study session ended without incident, and everyone started to head back to the dorm.

"Aw, I'm beat!" Ike whined.

For people like Ike and Yamauchi, who couldn't even concentrate during normal school hours, an after-school study session was the very definition of hell. They beamed with delight at being finally free, but Horikita glared icily at them.

"Today's not the end. We have another session tomorrow," she said.

"C-come on, I know that. Isn't it okay for me to be at least a little happy? I worked hard!" Ike shot back as the two idiots raced out of the library.

"Wow, Class D sure is lively. I almost wish you'd share some of that energy with us!" said Ichinose.

"Yeah, but they're lively about all the wrong things. To be honest, I envy Class B," replied Horikita.

She wasn't mistaken to feel that way. The Class B students were more focused than Class D; they were calm and composed, and cooperated with one another.

"Goodbye," Kushida said to Ichinose. "Horikita-san, goodbye to you, too."

"Yeah, goodbye," Horikita replied.

Kushida left without incident, a few other girls in tow. So, she was playing it cool for now. It seemed that both she and Horikita were checking each other out.

"Ichinose-san, can I ask you a few questions?" asked Horikita.

"Hmm? What kind of questions?"

"I'd prefer it if this was just between you and me. It'll only take a few minutes," said Horikita.

"A few minutes? All right. Sorry, everybody, but could you please

wait for me in the hall?" asked Ichinose.

"Should I stay?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter either way," said Horikita.

I thought she was being sarcastic, for a moment, but then realized she was probably employing reverse psychology to make me stick around.

"What did you want to talk about?" asked Ichinose.

It felt a little strange that the pair of them were alone like this. Ichinose and Horikita, two people with opposite personalities, stood shoulder to shoulder.

"Ichinose-san, if a friend or an ally were in trouble, you'd help them. Right?" asked Horikita.

"Um, yeah? Isn't that only natural?" replied Ichinose.

"Mm-hmm. And it's very kind of Class B to help us with these study sessions. So, if someone reached out to you for help, you'd offer them a hand. Right, Ichinose-san?" asked Horikita.

"Of course," Ichinose answered immediately. There was no indecision.

"Then, do you have clear criteria for determining who is and isn't your friend?" Maybe Horikita's conflict with Kushida prompted these questions.

"Hmm. What do you mean?"

"Well, would you be unconditionally willing to help someone, as long as they were from Class B? Even if that student didn't contribute much to the class?"

"No matter how the other person acted, I'd be on Class B's side. If someone were in trouble, I'd definitely try to help."

"Maybe this is a silly question, after all," said Horikita. "Well, let me ask you another silly question. Let's suppose someone in Class B hated you. Would you be able to like that person? Or would you end up hating them in return?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure. If they really hated me, my best option would be to avoid contact as much as possible, to keep them from disliking me even more," said Ichinose.

“And if that person were in trouble, what would you do?”

“Help them,” said Ichinose immediately. “Even if they really hated me, I’m always Class B’s ally.”

“Class B seems extremely important to you,” said Horikita.

“Yes. They’re all good kids. I admit that, at first, I was sad I wasn’t in Class A. But now, I think I’m in the best class. Don’t you feel the same, Horikita?”

“Well…home is where you make it, I suppose. Class D isn’t too bad,” said Horikita.

“Oh?” I muttered.

“What, Ayanokouji-kun? Have something to add?” Horikita glared at me.

“Sorry to insert myself into your conversation, but can I ask you something, Ichinose?” I said.

“Sure.”

“I understand that your classmates are unconditional allies. I do think it’s necessary to be friends with everyone in your boat, so to speak. However, are the Class A, C, and D students your friends?”

“Well, you and Horikita-san are dear friends to me, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Then what if we’re in trouble? What if we came to you, begging you to lend us a million points?” I asked.

“If there were a good reason, I’d help. The amount doesn’t matter,” said Ichinose.

“Sheesh. Your generosity knows no bounds. You’ll really help anyone?”

“Ideally, yes, but I know it’s not always that simple. There’s a limit to how much I can do myself. If Ryuuen-kun were in trouble, I couldn’t help him like I help others. But if it’s within my power, I’ll help,” said Ichinose. “As long as you’re my friend, a problem’s nature or intensity doesn’t matter.”

“Although I appreciate that, I have my doubts. So, if I came crying to you, begging for help…?”

“I’d welcome you with open arms.”

“In that case…what would you do if Kanzaki-kun and I had the same problem?” Horikita asked.

“You mean if I had to pick one of you?” Ichinose was at a complete loss. “Sorry. I don’t know how to answer that. In a hypothetical scenario like that, no matter who I helped, I’d hurt someone else.”

That was just like Ichinose. Horikita seemed both genuinely surprised and impressed.

“I don’t believe purely good people exist. Humans are crafty animals who want their virtues rewarded,” said Horikita. “But after hearing what you said… Maybe there really *are* good people in this world.”

Ichinose seemed taken aback. “You’re giving me far too much credit, Horikita-san.”

She’d been honest and straightforward with us so far, but now, her eyes darted around the room.

“Well, I at least think you’re a better person than anyone I’ve ever met,” said Horikita.

“I’m really not so wonderful,” replied Ichinose. She couldn’t even look Horikita in the face.

“Really, it’s not a big deal.” Horikita obviously noticed Ichinose’s strange reaction. “I’m sorry. Perhaps I went a little overboard. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t really make me uncomfortable.” Still, Ichinose was clearly shaken. “Is that all you wanted to talk about? Chihiro-chan and the others are waiting on me. Can we call it a day?”

“Thank you for answering my silly questions,” said Horikita.

“No problem. Well, I’ll see you tomorrow,” replied Ichinose.

After she left, Horikita and I, a few third-year students, and the library staff were all that remained.

“Let’s head back,” said Horikita. “I still have things to do.”

“What are you going to do about Kushida? It sounds like you came up with something,” I said. Horikita probably didn’t like being asked that question over and over, but I had to make sure.

“She’s special. I’ll have to be extra careful,” said Horikita.

“Special?”

“I’ve been thinking about several things. About the kind of life Kushida Kikyou would’ve had at this school had I not enrolled here. Everyone in class would’ve trusted and leaned upon her. She could have studied and played sports without any concerns. She would’ve carried on like that until graduation. However, my presence took that easy future from her. She worked with an enemy, Ryuuen-kun, in a desperate bid to drive me out. She didn’t hesitate to attack her own class. Of course, that isn’t my fault. It’s just bad luck that we ended up at the same school.”

“I have a suggestion,” I told Horikita.

“What kind of suggestion?”

“I believe I found the puzzle piece you’ll need to reconcile with Kushida.”

“What do you mean?”

“Would you agree that Ichinose is a good person?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t doubt it, even if I caught wind of unpleasant rumors about her,” said Horikita.

“So, why not get a good person to mediate between you two? Frankly, I think nothing will come from a one-on-one conversation with Kushida. She would never reveal her true nature to anyone in Class D.”

“Maybe not… But even so, I don’t think it’s right to have Ichinose mediate,” said Horikita.

“I don’t think this’ll resolve everything. I’m just saying it’s a step in the right direction. Right now, you and Kushida aren’t even on good enough terms to talk. If Ichinose mediated, you could probably have an actual conversation.”

In fact, Ichinose was just the first step in resolving this problem. More puzzle pieces were yet to come.

Horikita shook her head. “I can’t accept that. I’m going to settle things with Kushida myself.”

That didn’t sound like a terribly good idea.

5.8

Kushida was waiting for us. When she saw Horikita and me, she gave a small wave and smiled brightly.

“Kushida-san. Sorry to have kept you waiting,” Horikita said.

“It’s all right. There’s still a little time left before we were scheduled to meet. What were you talking about with Honami-chan?” asked Kushida.

“Nothing important.”

“I’d still like to know. Is it something you can tell me?” Kushida’s tone of voice and smile remained unchanged, but the tension rose.

“Sure. After all, it’s completely unrelated to you,” said Horikita. “I asked her how I could talk to people equally, without showing distinction or favoritism.”

“Oh?”

“I’m not going to lie. I was asking about you, Kushida-san,” said Horikita.

“Listen here, Horikita-san. While you and I may not get along, I’d much rather talk about this without Ayanokouji-kun,” said Kushida. “Or could it be…that Ayanokouji-kun and Ichinose-san now know something?”

She glared at us. Horikita, however, didn’t flinch.

“Sorry, Ayanokouji-kun, but could you head back without me?” said Horikita.

“Looks like I’m getting in the way,” I muttered.

I left them and made my way toward the exit. After changing my shoes, I headed to the dormitory. En route, I got a call from Horikita and answered it.

I heard Horikita’s muffled voice through the phone’s speaker. *“We attended the same junior high. Because I know about your past, you want to get me expelled. Do I have the facts correct?”*

Apparently, Horikita called me with her phone in her pocket. She

was letting me listen in.

"Well, this is certainly sudden. Why bring up the past? I don't like talking about that."

"I don't like it, either. But we can't avoid it."

"Well, we've rarely had the chance to be alone like this. But you're certainly right—I do want you to disappear from this school, Horikita-san. And, yes, it's because we were in junior high together, and you know about that incident."

"Although it's true that I heard about an incident, I didn't care. I didn't have any friends back then, anyway. All I heard were rumors. I don't know what the truth really is."

"But there's no guarantee you don't know, is there?"

"You're right. That's why you can't let it go. No matter how much I deny it, you can't be sure I'm not lying. I imagine that you'd like to have me kicked out of school because you can't forgive me for knowing that there was an incident at all."

Kushida didn't deny it.

"How about we place a bet, Kushida-san?"

"A bet? What are you talking about?"

I couldn't imagine that this was something Horikita just came up with on the fly. She'd most likely planned it.

"You don't like that I'm here. I can't do anything about that, right?"

"Right. As long as you're here, Horikita-san, I can't rest easy."

"But we're both in Class D. If we don't work together, we can't advance to Class A."

"Actually, I think expelling you will solve the problem."

"Do you plan on dropping out, too?"

"Of course not. Only you'll drop out, Horikita-san."

While their voices were muffled, both of them sounded very calm.

"I have no intention of dropping out," said Horikita.

"Then there's nothing we can do. I don't think we can get along."

"You might be right about that. I've been trying to come up with a way we can coexist. But I concluded that, no matter what I do, it's impossible."

“I think so too, Horikita-san. This won’t be over until one of us is gone.”

“We aren’t children. We can’t just fight. But you don’t trust me.”

There was a brief silence. Then Kushida spoke.

“What did you mean when you said ‘place a bet’?”

“If I score higher than you on the upcoming final exam, you’ll cooperate with me from now on without any hostility. I’m not expecting us to be best friends; I just want you to stop trying to hurt me. That’s all.”

“That’s ridiculous, Horikita-san. I didn’t beat your midterm score. Even if we based this bet on our total scores, it would still be hard for me to win. Besides, I’d gain nothing from winning.”

“Yes. That’s true. So…” Horikita’s voice was barely above a whisper now. *“Let’s determine the winner based on one of the eight subjects. You’re free to choose whichever subject you’re best in. If your score is higher than mine, I’ll drop out of school. That’s my offer.”*

I couldn’t believe this. Horikita was taking a huge gamble, and she gave Kushida rather favorable conditions to boot by allowing her to choose her best subject. If Kushida lost, she wouldn’t need to drop out. She’d just have to stop getting in Horikita’s way. On the other hand, if Kushida won, Horikita was done for.

“But this is just a verbal agreement, Horikita-san. If you lose, you could act like the bet never happened. Of course, I might not uphold my part of the arrangement, either. Can we both really trust what the other person says?”

“To make things official, I intend to involve a reliable witness.”

“A reliable witness?”

“If you would, please…niisan.”

“Wha—?!”

Kushida seemed honestly shocked. I was, too. Horikita was so deadly serious about this agreement, she’d brought her older brother to act as witness.

“I’m terribly sorry to ask this of you, niisan. But I absolutely need your help.”

That’s right. She’d actually summoned Horikita Manabu, the former student council president and her older brother, to the spot.

“It’s been a long time, Kushida,” I heard him say. *“Do you remember me?”*

“I don’t forget people.”

The Horikita siblings had attended the same junior high as Kushida. But Horikita’s older brother graduated before the incident involving Kushida happened, so he couldn’t know that she’d caused it.

“I trust my brother the most in this school. You can trust him as well, Kushida-san. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell him any details.”

“I was called to act as witness, nothing more. I’m not interested in anything else.”

“Are you okay with this, Horikita-senpai? If your little sister loses, then __”

“She made the bet. It has nothing to do with me.”

“I also swear that I won’t say a word to anyone if I lose, Kushida-san. I’d bring shame on my brother’s name if I went around breaking promises. I would never do that.”

The deal couldn’t possibly get any better for Kushida.

“You’re serious, aren’t you, Horikita-san?”

“I’m not the kind to wait around for people to strike.”

“Fine. I accept your challenge. And I’m all right with the terms of the bet. I choose mathematics. Can I assume that if we end up getting the same score, neither one of us wins?”

Horikita must have nodded. They’d agreed to terms right in front of Horikita’s brother. There was no way to back out now.

“I will fulfill my role as witness. Should either of you violate the bet, you’d best be prepared for the consequences.”

Even after retiring as student council president, Horikita’s brother still held a great deal of authority. Kushida would honor the arrangement until he graduated, at the very least.

“Thank you very much, niisan.”

The conversation went silent. Kushida and Horikita were probably waiting for Horikita’s brother to leave.

“I’m looking forward to the final exam, Horikita-san.”

“Let’s give it everything we’ve got. Both of us.”

“Yes. Give my regards to Ayanokouji-kun, too.”

“Why?”

“Because you told him, didn’t you? About my past.”

“That’s—”

“Ah, you don’t really need to answer that. I don’t trust you, Horikita-san, so it doesn’t matter. I won’t violate our bet’s terms, so you can relax. Besides, Ayanokouji-kun has seen a little of my bad side.”

I felt Horikita’s panic through the phone. *“Yes. I told Ayanokouji-kun.”*

“I knew it. By the way, are you using your phone right now? You see, I’ve tried calling you over and over for the last few minutes, Horikita-san, but it seems like you’ve been on a call.”

It wasn’t just intuition. Kushida had some guts.

“Care to join us, Ayanokouji-kun?”

It was probably best for me to obey.

5.9

I headed back to Kushida and Horikita.

“Yoo-hoo!” said Kushida. Although she had a cheery expression, I couldn’t tell what her true feelings were.

“You really got me, Kushida-san. You’re incredible,” said Horikita.

“Thank you. But, really, I’m merely observant,” replied Kushida.

“Why did you call for Ayanokouji-kun?” Horikita asked. “I thought our conversation was over. If you’re angry that I had him listen in, just say so.”

“I’m not particularly displeased. It’s just that I’d rather speak to you both face-to-face. I was wondering whether you would mind me adding another condition to the bet,” said Kushida.

“A condition?”

“If I beat your score, Horikita-san, I want Ayanokouji-kun to drop out, too.”

I’d thought that Kushida might propose this.

“No,” replied Horikita.

“I want to make everyone who knows about my past disappear. Even if you’re no longer here, Horikita-san, if Ayanokouji-kun remains, so will my troubles.”

“Maybe. But this is my gamble, so I can’t involve him.”

“Well, that’s too bad. I could’ve killed two birds with one stone.”

“So, you want me expelled too, huh?” I asked.

“Ha ha ha! There’s no need to look so disappointed. It’s not your fault, Ayanokouji-kun. It’s just bad luck that you learned about my true nature.”

“There’s no problem if he doesn’t tell anyone, though,” said Horikita.

“If that were all it took, Horikita-san, you wouldn’t have challenged me to this bet.”

“Well, you’re vital to Class D, after all.”

“You’ve changed. You wouldn’t have said that before.”

“If I’m always fighting with my peers, then I’ll never make it to the higher classes. I’ll be stuck in a vicious circle,” said Horikita.

Had the two of them ever talked this openly before? Yet they couldn’t see eye to eye. Such a tragic fate. If they hadn’t attended the same junior high, Kushida probably would have cooperated with Horikita. In that case, Kushida would’ve influenced the classmates Hirata and Karuizawa couldn’t reach, and Class D might have united much sooner.

“Can I join this wager? I bet that Horikita will win,” I said.

“Wait a minute,” said Horikita. “What are you saying, Ayanokouji-kun? This has nothing to do with you.”

“It started out that way. But now it does have something to do with me. Besides, I eavesdropped on your conversation.”

Even if Horikita won the bet and was temporarily free from Kushida’s attacks, Kushida could just focus her offensive on me instead. If I protected myself now, it would make things easier in the long run.

“I’d be happy to have you join,” said Kushida.

“But I also have a condition.”

“Hmm?”

“I want you to tell me the specifics of this junior high incident.” I was entering dangerous territory.

“That’s—”

I didn’t hold back. If I acted swiftly now, I could secure an advantage. “It’s my right to ask for this much. I don’t know any details, and yet you’re trying to get me expelled. You’re acting on the belief that Horikita knows about the incident, right? So, just explain it to us right now. As long as you beat Horikita on the test, the school will kick us both out, and you won’t have to worry.”

“I’m not interested in her past,” said Horikita.

“Well, I am. I can’t accept that Kushida’s threatening my whole life here on a selfish whim,” I replied.

“It’s true that you’re now involved, Ayanokouji-kun. I can’t deny

that. If Horikita-san really hasn't told you the details, I understand your feelings. But if I do tell you, there'll be no turning back. Understand?" asked Kushida.

"Haven't I already passed the point of no return?" I asked. Kushida had designated me her enemy.

"Yes. You're way past it."

"In that case, tell me why it's worth taking this gamble."

Horikita probably wondered why I was going this far—why I would risk being expelled. Her eyes said as much, but she wouldn't question anything in front of Kushida.

Sorry, but I can't do what you want, Horikita. I finally have the chance to expose Kushida Kikyou's past.

"Ayanokouji-kun, is there something that you're the best at? Better than anyone else?" asked Kushida.

"I'm just an average person. What you'd call a jack of all trades, master of none. If I had to pick something, I guess I'm a little faster than average."

"Then I wonder if you can understand what I'm feeling. Don't you think that the best thing in the world is feeling valued in some special way? When you get the highest score on a test, or win first place in a race, everyone's eyes are on you. You know those moments when people shower you with attention?" asked Kushida.

Of course I understood. People naturally desired the approval of others. Working hard enough to earn praise for accomplishments was fundamental to how human society functioned.

"I think that I'm probably addicted to that feeling," Kushida said. "More so than normal people. I can't help wanting to show off. I can't help wanting to stand out. I can't help wanting to be praised. When I am, I truly feel how wonderful it is to be alive. But I know my own limits. No matter how hard I try, I won't be number one in school or in sports—and coming second or third won't satisfy my cravings. So, I thought I'd do something that no one else could—be nicer and kinder than everyone else."

That was the root of Kushida's kindness? It was better to be a genuinely kind, helpful person who made mistakes than someone two-faced who just bragged about being perfectly good. A kind but flawed

individual was more honest than a saintly liar.

“Thanks to that, I became popular with both boys and girls. I took pleasure in being trusted and relied upon. Elementary school and junior high were really fun,” said Kushida.

“Isn’t it agonizing, though? Doing things that you don’t want to do? If it were me, I couldn’t take it. I think I’d break down,” said Horikita.

“Of course it’s agonizing. Day after day, I’m under so much stress I feel like I’m going to go bald. I’ve pulled my hair out and vomited from anxiety. But I can’t let anyone see that side of me. That’s why I continued to endure, and endure, and endure,” said Kushida.

How had she kept this act up for so long?

“My blog saved me. It was the only place where I dumped out this hidden stress. I could tell it all my most painful secrets. Of course, I posted everything anonymously, you know? But I wrote the facts just as they were, and it made me so happy when I received encouragement from people I didn’t even know. Then, one day, a classmate discovered my blog. Even though I hadn’t named anyone, it was clear my posts were all based on real events.”

“That’s how this incident started?”

“The next day, my posts were shared with the entire class. Everyone condemned me. I’d helped them so much, and yet they all turned on me. Selfish, right? The boy who’d told me that he liked me actually shoved me. It was understandable, though, since I’d posted that his romantic confession grossed me out and I wanted him to die. One girl I’d comforted after she was dumped even kicked my desk. I’d posted in detail about why she was dumped and made fun of her. Over thirty students decided I was their mortal enemy that day.”

“So, how did you make it through? Violence? Or lies?” That was the mystery that Horikita and I still didn’t know the answer to.

“Neither. All I did was tell the truth. I revealed all my classmates’ secrets. Who hated who, who thought who was a disgusting creep. I exposed truths I hadn’t even written on my blog.”

Of course. Truth was a weapon that you could only obtain through trust. Horikita and I didn’t have that. Although truth might seem harmless, it was actually a powerful double-edged sword, only

usable at the cost of more trust.

“At that point, my classmates stopped being angry at me and started hating each other. The boys got into fistfights, the girls pulled each other’s hair and shoved each other over. The entire classroom descended into complete chaos. It was honestly incredible.”

“So, that’s how it happened.”

“Because of everything I exposed, the class could no longer function. The school rebuked me, but my blog was anonymous, and all I technically did was tell my classmates the truth.” Kushida spoke indifferently, but every word she uttered carried weight. “I still don’t know that much about my fellow Class D students. However, I know enough to destroy a few people. That’s my only weapon.”

A threat. If we told anyone about her, we should prepare for the consequences. If Kushida felt it was necessary, she would tear a rift in Class D right after we’d finally started bringing everyone together. If that happened, the harmony we’d established would disappear.

“It was a mistake to use the internet to vent my feelings. Everything you put up there is saved forever. That’s why I stopped blogging. Now, I blow off steam by saying what’s on my mind out loud when I’m alone.”

Like the first time I’d seen that other side of her.

“Do you want to remain as you are right now?” I asked.

“This is my reason for being. More than I love anything else in the world, I love everyone respecting and noticing me. When people trust me with their secrets, I feel joy that surpasses my wildest imaginings.”

Knowing the anxiety, suffering, embarrassment, and hopes that people held deep within their hearts was Kushida’s forbidden fruit.

“Boring, isn’t it? But to me, it’s everything.” Kushida’s smile disappeared. Now that she’d told us about her past, we became true enemies in her eyes. From this point onward, she wouldn’t show us the slightest compassion. “Don’t forget. If I score higher in math, both you and Ayanokouji-kun will drop out.”

“Yes,” said Horikita.

And that was that. Satisfied, Kushida left to return to her dorm.

I turned to Horikita. “Are you sure about this? Kushida’s involved with Ryuuen.”

“If you knew it was dangerous, why did you join? Because you believe I won’t lose?” Horikita countered.

“Well, yeah.” Truthfully, I went along with the bet because I had some ideas of my own.

“Even though Kushida might be able to help Ryuuen-kun, I really

have to wonder whether it'll come to that," said Horikita.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think that Ryuuen-kun really wants me to drop out?" she asked.

"It's doubtful."

Ryuuen wanted to entrap Horikita, but he wasn't trying to get her kicked out of school. He hoped to see her brought low, and her expulsion would end those aspirations. Besides, would he really let Horikita go without finding out who was working with her in secret? Would he let her get expelled without exposing me first?

"But what if Kushida lies to get the questions from him? She might say that she wants to improve her personal score, and keep our bet's details secret," I said.

"Ryuuen-kun would see through something like that. If Kushida-san asked for the math answers, he'd want to know why," said Horikita.

"You're probably right. But this is dangerous."

"There'll always be danger. It helps to have things you're willing to put on the line."

"There's no turning back from this. We definitely need to win."

"Of course."

Horikita was making her biggest gamble yet.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Miyake Akito
CLASS:	First Year, Class D
STUDENT ID:	S01T004700
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	Archery
DATE OF BIRTH:	July 13th

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	D
INTELLIGENCE:	D
DECISION MAKING:	C
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	B
COOPERATIVENESS:	D–

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

He joined the archery club in junior high and has kept it up ever since. He's even participated in prefectural competitions. Regarding his academics, he's clearly better at some subjects than at others, but he's mature and has no attitude problems. However, he received counseling after starting several fights in the past. He needs to develop into a properly well-rounded student.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

The archery club speaks highly of him, and his passion for his sport is palpable. I hope to see him direct more of that energy into class.

Chapter 6:
The Ayanokouji Group's Formation

Time flew by, and soon it was time for Yukimura's fifth study session with Miyake and Hasebe. We'd held the prior sessions at Pallet, but we decided to gather at the café inside Keyaki Mall today. We anticipated that Pallet would be exceptionally crowded, since all the clubs had ceased activities in order for the students to focus on the final.

"Wow, it's even noisier than I imagined," said Yukimura.

He looked overwhelmed by the number of students in the café. We managed to secure seats, but Pallet was practically at full capacity. It was packed with students from all grades sitting in their own study groups. Despite how focused everyone was on cramming, the library would definitely have been quieter.

"We should've met in the library," said Yukimura, echoing my thoughts. "Or in my room."

"No way. It's easier to do it here. Right, Miyacchi?" asked Hasebe.

"Yeah. Archery club is already quiet and tense enough," replied Miyake.

No one wanted to be stuck in a stuffy room. The modern method was to study while chatting with friends. Degenerative evolution.

"Well, you're the ones who'll be studying. If you say that you can concentrate, then I believe you. Here, I prepared some material," said Yukimura.

He handed Hasebe and Miyake notebooks full of questions on the humanities. The two accepted the material indifferently. The questions were lined up closely, like food stalls packed together at a festival with a fireworks display. Yukimura looked all keyed up. These problems he'd created wouldn't be easy to solve.

"Whoa. You really went overboard. You're merciless, Yukimuu!" said Hasebe. Since she didn't exactly like studying, let alone studying her weakest subject, I was sure this was torture for her. Miyake,

meanwhile, looked as though he was about to vomit. He kept his hands over his stomach while he perused the notebook.

"How can you be so terrified before you even start?" asked Yukimura.

"It's just… There are clearly way more questions here than last time, and they look harder."

"That's a mediocre student's mindset. Think about what you *can* do first, and challenge yourself," said Yukimura.

"In that case, are the questions simpler than last time?" Hasebe asked.

"Of course not."

"Yeah, I knew they'd be tough."

Honestly, the problems Yukimura had come up with really were brilliant. He could probably become a real teacher someday if he tried. He chided students, but never gave up on them, and never raised his voice or lost his patience when they didn't understand something. Had Yukimura, like Horikita, matured? It was incredible.

In the first semester, Horikita and Yukimura had both insisted they were placed in Class D by mistake, as both were superior students. That felt like such a long time ago.

"Come on, Hasebe." Miyake understood that there was no point in grumbling.

"Wow, you're getting pretty gung-ho there, Miyacchi. What's up with you? Is your blood boiling?" she asked.

"I finally got a break from club stuff, but I don't want to spend all my free time studying. Can I head back after I finish?" Miyake asked Yukimura.

"Of course."

Yukimura and Horikita had different teaching methods. While Horikita designated a fixed amount of time for studying, Yukimura was more flexible. His sessions lasted until the students got through all the material, and could therefore finish earlier or later than expected. The method's effectiveness depended on who Yukimura tutored—if he tried this with lackadaisical students like Ike, for instance, it would be a bust. They'd probably just answer without thinking so they could finish early

and escape.

“If you don’t have any free time, why not quit the club?” asked Hasebe.

“I want to be in the club. I just also want free time,” replied Miyake.

“Wow, selfish.”

It seemed that Yukimura really had a positive impact on them both. I didn’t think they had any remaining doubts about his method’s effectiveness.

“All right, Ayanokouji. Starting today, I’ll have you do these, too.”

“Huh…?”

“You get good enough grades, but your partner is Satou. You’ll need to prepare and review thoroughly so you don’t both get kicked out,” said Yukimura.

“No, I—”

“Just do it, Ayanokouji-kun. Let’s all die together,” said Hasebe, dipping her head low so her hair hung down. She grabbed my hand, as if she were a vengeful spirit trying to drag me into a well.

“Welcoooome,” she moaned.

A shiver ran up my spine as I was swallowed by the terrible darkness of the humanities questions.

6.1

"That reminds me. There's a guy named Yoshimoto-kun in Class C, right? Do you know him, Miyacchi?"

"Yoshimoto Kousetsu? Yeah, he's in the archery club."

"I heard that he started going out with a second-year. You know about that?" Hasebe, tired of studying, started to gossip.

"Nope. But, come to think of it, he's been in a real hurry to leave as soon as club ends lately. That must be why."

If you were an adult in your thirties, an age difference of a year or two didn't matter much. For high school students, though, trying to date someone even one grade above you was tricky. At least, I was fairly sure that was how things worked.

"It seems as if Yoshimoto-kun's really into it. He said they're going to get married someday. Jeez, guys are morons, aren't they?" Hasebe and Miyake's conversation completely derailed their focus.

"Talk about the future later. First, get your work done," said Yukimura.

"I know, I know. We're just taking a short break," said Hasebe. She didn't seem to care what Yukimura said.

"Yes. Very short."

"Wow, okay, I feel those sarcastic vibes. I'm gonna get a refill."

"You're having even more sugar? Your coffee's so ridiculously sweet, I'm shocked you can drink it," said Miyake.

"Well, I struggle to understand why anyone would drink their coffee black." Hasebe started to get up, but stumbled slightly over the backpack she'd placed at her feet. "Whoa!"

She dropped her empty cup. My eyes followed it as it rolled along the ground, until it stopped rolling by a particular student's feet.

"Ah, sorr—" Hasebe started to apologize. However, the student's foot crushed the cup.

"My, you seem to be enjoying yourselves. Mind if we join?" asked

Ryuuen.

“What are you…?” Hasebe glared at the Class C guys. An understandable reaction. Ryuuen had a smug grin on his face. Ishizaki, Komiya, and Kondou, the evergreen trio of goons, stood behind him.

There was also one girl with them whom we hadn’t seen before. She stood next to Ishizaki, and appeared extremely calm.

“Hey!” said Hasebe. “Why’d you stomp on my cup like that?”

“It rolled up to my feet, so I thought you were throwing it away. I stomped it to save you the trouble,” said Ryuuen.

He kicked the crushed cup back toward Hasebe, laughing. A little of the remaining liquid splashed onto the ground.

Miyake slowly stood. “Hey, Ryuuen. Knock it off.”

“Oh? And whom exactly do you think you’re speaking to, buddy?” Ishizaki grabbed Miyake by his collar.

“I wasn’t talking to you. Lackeys should mind their own business, Ishizaki,” said Miyake, shaking off his grip.

“Bastard!” shouted Ishizaki, attracting other patrons’ attention.

Surprisingly, that outburst enraged Ryuuen most of all. “Shut up. Are you really trying to throw down, Ishizaki?”

“S-sorry. Miyake was getting full of himself, so I—”

“Reckless idiots amuse me, but I need you to behave yourself for now.”

“Yes…”

Ryuuen was right to rein in Ishizaki. Senior students, store clerks, and several surveillance cameras surrounded us. Nothing went unseen here, and if Class C started trouble, they would pay for it.

“I have no business with you. I’m interested in those two,” said Ryuuen to Miyake, glancing at Yukimura and me. “Did you receive my gift?”

Naturally, Yukimura was bewildered. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Ryuuen looked to me. Without a doubt, the “gift” was the email he’d sent me the other day, the one that said, *What are you?*

“Who knows?” I feigned ignorance. Ryuuen’s methods were

heavy-handed. I wouldn't dig my own grave by answering his questions.

"So, how about it? Did *you* catch something, Hiyori?" Ryuuen glanced at the girl with him.

"I can't say anything at this stage," she replied.

A lot of the students working under Ryuuen were terrified of him, but this Hiyori was completely calm. She kept looking back and forth between Yukimura and me. What in the world was Ryuuen planning?

"Both their faces are weak. I'll probably forget them immediately," she added.

"Heh heh, come now. These are our future friends, after all."

"Yukimura-san, Ayanokouji-kun, Kouenji-kun. Who was the other guy?" she asked.

"It was Hirata."

"Yes, that's right. Hirata-san. Why are faces and names so hard to remember?" Hiyori was a complete mystery. I was concerned that Ishizaki was being this polite around her.

"It looks like the only one you'll remember is Kouenji."

"Well, he's unique," she replied.

So, Ryuuen suspected Hirata and Kouenji as well. Though Kouenji was far from a team player, it was only natural that Ryuuen was cautious of his talent. That said, I had a hunch that Ryuuen would never consider Kouenji a suspect if he knew what a natural-born weirdo Kouenji really was.

"What the hell do you want, Ryuuen?" asked Miyake aggressively. "We're busy. If you've got something to say, say it."

"Nothing. I just came to say hello. But I'll tell you something. We'll be seeing you again real soon," said Ryuuen.

"What does that mean?"

Ignoring Miyake, Ryuuen left with his lackeys in tow. At his departure, the café immediately grew lively again.

However, Hiyori remained, still watching us. We couldn't concentrate under these circumstances.

Hasebe spoke up. “What is it? You’re getting in the way of our studies,” she grumbled.

“Just wait,” replied Hiyori.

“Huh? Look, I’m telling you that you’re distracting us, so just go away. Understand?” said Hasebe, in a bad mood now that Ryuuen had crushed her cup.

Hiyori responded with an odd smile. She grabbed her bag and walked over to the cash register.

“What was *that* about?” asked Hasebe.

“Who knows? I don’t want to know,” said Yukimura.

“That’s Shiina Hiyori from Class C. I’ve seen her before,” said Miyake.

Hiyori placed an order at the register, then returned with two cups.

“Please accept this,” she said.

“What are you up to?” asked Hasebe.

“It’s quite all right. You needn’t be so wary of me. Please allow me to apologize on Class C’s behalf. I went ahead and took the liberty of adding some sugar. Do you mind?” said Hiyori.

“Adding some…hmm? Wow, this is tasty! It’s exactly the same as what I was just drinking!” exclaimed Hasebe.

“I noticed that a lot of sugar had collected at the bottom of the cup Ryuuen crushed, so I assumed that you liked your coffee sweet. I’m glad to see I wasn’t mistaken,” said Hiyori.

“It tastes like you put in the exact amount of sugar I did. Coincidence?” asked Hasebe.

“I used the amount of undissolved sugar to estimate how much you put in at first,” replied Hiyori.

“Huuuuh?! You can do that?!”

“Despite how I may look, I’m actually quite perceptive.” Hiyori fixed her gaze on Yukimura, then me, and then Miyake. “You’re holding a study session, aren’t you?”

“Girls like you just totally sap my energy,” grumbled Hasebe. Yukimura hurriedly closed everyone’s notebooks.

“Do you happen to think that I’m a spy?” asked Hiyori.

“We *definitely* think you’re a spy.”

“I wouldn’t, if I were you. I generally keep my distance from Ryuuen-kun.”

“Wait a minute. Didn’t Ryuuen-kun just call you by your first name?”

“I insisted that he let me accompany them to see you. Class D interests me.”

The rest of the study group tilted their heads in apparent confusion, unable to understand Hiyori’s words or intentions. I imitated them, cocking my head to the right as I pretended that I didn’t realize what was going on, either.

“You don’t know?” asked Hiyori. “It’s all anyone in Class C talks about right now. They say a master tactician’s hiding in Class D, disguising his or her true identity. Apparently, this tactician has contributed significantly to Class D’s successes, from the island test to the cruise ship and sports festival. You really don’t know?”

Hasebe, Yukimura, and Miyake almost had question marks floating above their heads. “I honestly have no clue what you’re talking about,” said Yukimura. “Do you mean Horikita?”

“Yeah. The only person I can think of is Horikita-san,” Miyake agreed.

“It’s not Horikita Suzune-san,” said Hiyori flatly. “Ayanokouji-san, you spend a great deal of time with Horikita-san, right?”

“Not so much recently, but I’ve probably spent more time with her than with others,” I replied.

“You *do* sit right next to her, don’t you?”

Hasebe and Miyake backed me up. “But there’s no one smarter than Horikita-san is.”

“Yeah. She comes up with all Class D’s strategies.”

It was important that I appeared like a typical Class D student right now.

“I see,” said Hiyori. “You all feel the same, is that it?”

“Can you please stop interrupting our study session?” muttered

Yukimura.

“I apologize. I’m disturbing your studies, aren’t I?”

“Yes, you’re exactly right. You are,” said Yukimura.

“You don’t have to be so harsh, Yukimuu,” Hasebe said.

“If you’re fine with failing and getting kicked out of school, go ahead and chat with her. I’ll head back,” said Yukimura.

“I-I’m sorry, really. Please forgive me. I’d like you to keep tutoring me,” said Hasebe. She bowed her head.

Hiyori stood up from her seat, looking apologetic. “I’m very sorry. You’re right that it’d be a real risk not to take this test seriously,” she said.

Was that a dig at the bad students? Although I got the impression that Hiyori was naturally rather aloof, I wasn’t certain whether she could be trusted or not.

“Let’s talk about that stuff after the final exam’s over.” Hiyori picked up her cup and made to go.

“Thank you for the coffee. It was yummy,” said Hasebe.

“No problem at all. Goodbye,” said Hiyori.

With that, she left alone after showing up with Ryuuen. She might have come here as part of Ryuuen’s plan to trap me, but I couldn’t be too careful. I decided to investigate Hiyori.

6.2

Since we all lived in the same dormitory, we walked back together. Fiddling with his phone, Yukimura recorded today's progress.

"It's been a long time since I studied this hard!" Hasebe said. "Six hours in class, plus another two hours afterward, right? There's gotta be, like, almost no students in the world who have to study that much, huh?"

"Those Class C students interrupted us and wasted our time, though," said Miyake.

"But we didn't let them throw us off. We studied hard today!" replied Hasebe.

An irritated look flashed across Yukimura's face at their happy chatter. "You've got to be joking. When university entrance exams begin, you'll need to study for at least *three* hours after class. Four hours, if you can manage it. And I mean every day. When exams are close, you'll want to study ten hours a day on your own."

"Huuuh? No way, no way! There's no way I can study like that. Come on, you know that, Yukimuu," said Hasebe.

"My older sister is a teacher. She always studied that much before an exam as her usual routine."

"Well, maybe you just come from a really elite lineage! Yukimuu, are you thinking of becoming a teacher?"

"There's nothing particularly 'elite' about becoming a teacher. If I wanted that, why would I come to a school like this, one unlike any others in the world?"

Yukimura had a point. If you wanted to be a teacher, there wasn't any particular benefit in specifically choosing this school.

"So, why did you come here?"

"It doesn't really matter. Do you want to ask everyone why they decided to enroll? If you had someone trying to pry into your business, you'd understand how it feels," said Yukimura.

He was clearly trying to shoot Hasebe down, but unfortunately,

his response appeared to have the opposite effect. Hasebe didn't look particularly upset. Rather, she volunteered her own life story.

"I got interested in the school because of the promotional advertising they ran, you know? I mean, advancing to higher education or getting a good job just because you graduated from here? Who wouldn't choose this place? Isn't that good enough for most people?" she said.

"A lot of people also enroll here because it's free. We don't even have to pay for our dorms, and the campus is set up so that we can survive without using any points. Right now, I appreciate that more than any guarantees after graduation," said Miyake.

"Don't you think that's kind of lame? I mean, being able to go to university or get a job anywhere is incredible," said Hasebe.

"Look, talk about your dreams after we're done with the final exam. The system you expect great things from won't do anything for you if you don't graduate from Class A, Hasebe," said Yukimura.

"There's gotta be some kind of bonus, though, right?" she replied. "Like, maybe the school lied about how only Class A wins. If we manage to graduate, who's to say we can't do whatever we want?"

"That's not very likely. If that were the case, we'd have heard about it, and I've heard nothing of the sort, not even during club activities. Besides, the second and third-year Class D students seem pretty miserable," said Miyake.

He had a point. I'd sensed no drive or ambition from the third-year Class D student I met earlier in the year.

"If we don't make it to Class A, graduating from this school could even have a *negative* impact on our careers. That's why I absolutely must graduate from Class A," said Yukimura.

"Ah, wow. That'd be the worst," agreed Hasebe.

Good colleges looked for people who'd attended prestigious schools and boasted impressive personal accomplishments. However, as far as the Advanced Nurturing High School was concerned, you were a defective product if you graduated from anything other than Class A. Universities and corporations had to know that about our school.

"Miyacchi, you've really committed to this study group, huh? And here I thought you'd quit right away," said Hasebe.

“Well, don’t you think it’s odd that *you’re* still here? You usually don’t want anything to do with anyone,” said Miyake.

“Well, sure. But if it’s a study group with you three, it’s all right,” she replied.

“Hasebe, do you mind if I ask you a question?” I said.

“Hmm?”

“Are you and Satou close?”

“Satou-san? No, not especially. I don’t really like big groups, anyway. If you’re curious about her, shouldn’t you ask Karuizawa-san?”

If I could do that, I wouldn’t be this stressed out. I didn’t want to talk about this with anyone too close to Satou. “Well…”

I couldn’t tell Hasebe the truth. Yukimura noticed that I was in trouble and spoke up. “I understand why you’re concerned,” he told me. “She’s your partner. Not knowing her strengths and weaknesses has to be nerve-racking.”

“Ah, yeah,” added Hasebe. “That’s right, you did say you guys were paired together.”

“Satou and I don’t have anything in common, so I can’t just talk to her,” I replied.

Hasebe put her hands together, as if offering condolences. However, she seemed to have a new idea. “If it’s hard to ask Karuizawa-san, why not try asking Kyo-chan? She and Satou-san are close.”

“Huh? Kyo-chan?” I didn’t recall ever hearing that nickname before.

“I’m talking about Kikyou-chan. You hang out with her a lot, don’t you, Ayanokouji-kun?”

This particular task certainly suited Kushida. She knew a lot about the class’s internal affairs. If it weren’t for the issue with Horikita, I wouldn’t have hesitated to ask her for help. However, I doubted that she was someone I could rely on.

Miyake added his two cents. “Yeah. Asking Karuizawa might be one thing, but Kushida should be good, right? She gets along with everyone, doesn’t she, Hasebe?”

“Mm-hmm. There’re a lot of girls I hate, but I like Kyo-chan. She does so much for the class without even batting an eye, and she’s

always cheerful. Normally, I don't like talking to other people, but Kyo-chan is special. She actually listens to you, and she'd never ever go around telling others what you said."

"Even you need some girl talk, huh?" said Miyake.

"Rude, Miyacchi. Young maidens have lots of things to talk about," said Hasebe.

"What kinds of things?"

"Why should I tell you? You'd definitely spill the beans to everyone."

"Would *not*. Well, probably not. Depends on what it is."

"If you're worried about anything, it's probably best to discuss it with Kushida," Yukimura told me.

"Right?" agreed Hasebe. "I don't know whether you like Satou-san or not, but if you told Kushida-san, she definitely wouldn't let it slip."

"What? *You* like Satou, Ayanokouji?" said Miyake.

"I didn't say anything like that. I just asked whether Hasebe was close to Satou, that's all."

"Isn't that kind of suspicious, though?" said Hasebe. "You haven't exactly been tight with Satou-san until now, right?"

"Ayanokouji said that he was worried about Satou because they're partners. Did you already forget that?" asked Miyake.

Hasebe didn't back down. "Because of the way he asked, it just feels like there's more to it, y'know?"

Girls had a powerful radar for secrets that I couldn't comprehend.

"That reminds me. Is it okay if we swing by the convenience store real quick?" Miyake's proposal derailed the conversation. *Thank goodness.*

Kushida was clearly a vital asset that Class D couldn't afford to lose. From the very beginning, she'd been involved in everything. She dedicated herself to supporting other students, and now she was seeing the fruits of her labor. Everyone in our class liked her. When someone wasn't present, people usually griped about them, so it was remarkable to hear only good things said about Kushida in her absence.

"Ah, yeah. I need to make a stop for some treats, too. Come on,

guys," said Hasebe.

"You're such a child," said Yukimura. Still, he joined them.

6.3

The four of us stood outside the convenience store, eating ice cream.

“Whew, having ice cream when it’s slightly chilly outside is a trip,” said Hasebe, bringing a spoonful of vanilla ice cream to her mouth.

Yukimura must not have eaten ice cream much, because he was reading the ingredients. “This is just a smorgasbord of preservatives and food coloring.”

“How do you enjoy anything if you’re that worried about every single detail?” said Hasebe.

“I’m particular about what I eat. I’ve been thinking about how I was in such poor shape when we were on the island. Now, I buy my food from the organic section in the supermarket.”

“You sure are serious,” said Hasebe.

“Besides, convenience store food is expensive. If you just make the short trip over to the mall, you can get the same things at a lower price. Why not buy your groceries more efficiently?” asked Yukimura, pointing to the grocery bags that Hasebe carried.

“Yukimuu, you’re not one of those penny-pinching misers, are you?”

“I’m just conscientious about money. Also…what’s with calling me ‘Yukimuu’?”

“You’re Yukimura-kun, so, Yukimuu. When I make friends with someone, I give them a nickname. Miyacchi, Yukimuu, and Ayanon. Hmm…for some reason, Ayanon doesn’t really roll off the tongue,” said Hasebe.

There it was. My first iffy nickname.

“Quit calling me Yukimuu. It’s embarrassing.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I didn’t say that. I said it’s embarrassing.”

“Come on, it’s not a big deal.”

“It’s just that calling me Y-Yukimuu in front of other people is a little…” Yukimura trailed off.

Hasebe responded with a surprisingly serious look. “You know, I think our friendship is coming along nicely,” she said.

“A friendship where we can use nicknames, you mean?”

“Well, you and Ayanon are like me and Miyacchi. We’re all loners, right?” said Hasebe.

“Hmm. I suppose so.”

“Now that I’ve actually tried becoming a member of this group, I feel more comfortable than I expected. Also, Yukimuu and Ayanon, you don’t have many friends, right? We’re more than halfway through the second semester, so I thought I’d like to be friends with a new group. It’s not like I’m trying to make up for lost time or anything. I just wanted to give you guys nicknames so that we could open up to each other. What do you two think?” asked Hasebe.

Miyake spoke up. “Yeah. This isn’t too bad. I feel like I’ve gotten used to being in a group. I don’t get along well with Sudou and those guys, and I think Hirata’s kinda in another league. He’s always surrounded by girls.”

“Right? So, what do you two think?” Hasebe repeated.

Both Hasebe and Miyake seemed to want the four of us to be friends. Would Yukimura turn them down?

“I just wanted to oversee your studies. When the test is done, this study group will end. But…I suppose there will be more tests. So, I don’t mind forming a group for the sake of efficiency,” said Yukimura.

“Okay, that was a little insulting. But…thanks,” said Hasebe.

“Well, y-yeah. We want to keep the school from expelling anyone, after all,” Yukimura replied.

“That just leaves Ayanon. Oh, but Ayanon, since you’re already in a group with Horikita-san, will this be difficult for you? You hang out with Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun, too,” said Hasebe.

“Well, I’m not better or worse than any of our classmates, but I think I’m a little different,” I replied. “There are lots of ways Ike, Horikita, and I aren’t compatible. I suppose it’s good that I don’t have to

pretend to be someone I'm not around you guys. Horikita and I just sit next to each other in class. It's not like we're in a clique or anything."

"I see. Well then, it's decided. From now on, we'll be known as the Ayanokouji Group. Nice to meet all you group members!"

"Wait. Why'd you name the group after me?"

"Well, you brought us together, more or less. Isn't that enough?"

"I don't object. Besides, it'd be weird if we called ourselves the Yukimura Group," said Yukimura.

"One more thing. From here on out, let's ban the use of formal surnames in the Ayanokouji Group," said Hasebe.

"You can go ahead and ban whatever, but I won't say M-Miyacchi, or…A-Ayanon, or anything like that. It's embarrassing," said Yukimura.

It would definitely feel really weird for Yukimura or me to call Miyake something like "Miyacchi." I was relieved that Yukimura felt the same.

"Well, let's at least use first names. My name's Haruka. You can call me whatever you want. What's your first name again, Miyacchi?" said Hasebe.

"It's Akito."

Hasebe looked expectantly at Yukimura and me.

"Akito, huh? Easy enough. Ayanokouji, your first name's Kiyotaka, isn't it?" said Yukimura. We'd been roommates during the cruise.

"And your first name's Teruhiko, right, Yukimura?" I replied.

Yukimura's expression darkened for some reason. "You remembered?" he asked. He looked troubled by that.

"So, Yukimuu's first name is Teruhiko, huh? Wonder if I should think of another nickname," said Hasebe.

"Knock it off," snapped Yukimura. Hasebe shrank back.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"I'm okay with calling you all by your first names. I accept that much. But will you please stop calling me Teruhiko?" he replied.

"So, you're fine calling us by *our* first names, but you hate being called by *your* first name?!" asked Hasebe.

“It’s not that I don’t like any of you. It’s just that I hate my name. I never really had to worry about it before, because no one called me by it,” said Yukimura.

“It’s not especially unconventional. Isn’t it actually pretty common?” asked Miyake. “Is there any particular reason why you hate it?”

“Yes. My mother named me Teruhiko. She’s a contemptible woman who left the family when I was little, so I reject the name she gave me,” said Yukimura. Hasebe and Miyake’s faces stiffened, and Yukimura changed the topic. “Sorry. I made you uncomfortable.”

“No, no, I’m sorry. I just blurted out your name without permission, after all,” said Hasebe.

“You don’t need to apologize. You didn’t know. Most people like using their first name, after all. I’d prefer not to ruin the mood, so why don’t you call me Keisei from now on? It’s the name I’ve used since I was a child,” said Yukimura.

“Keisei? So, you have two first names, Yukimuu? This is crazy complicated.”

“Keisei isn’t my real name. It’s the name my father wanted to give me, so I made it my own after my mother left. You could call me Keisei or Yukimura,” he replied.

If that was what he wanted, that was what we would do. Besides, it wasn’t weird for someone to have two different names. Ordinary people made a habit of it, as did celebrities.

“Well, I didn’t mean to use a name you didn’t like. Right, Miyacchi?”

“Yeah. Nice to meet you, Keisei.”

“Sorry for being so selfish about that…Kiyotaka, Akito, and Haruka,” replied Yukimura.

“No worries. Everyone’s got their own issues,” I said.

Just like I had a past that I didn’t want exposed, Yukimura…no, Keisei…also had a past he wanted to hide.

I tried saying everyone else’s names just like Keisei had done. “Akito, Keisei, and…Haruka, right? I’ll remember those,” I told them. It was even more stressful to call a girl by her first name.

“Anyway, Kiyotaka? We won’t call you ‘Ayanon,’ but what about ‘Kiyopon’?” Haruka seemed stuck on the issue of my name. “Yeah, that one definitely rolls off the tongue better. Yukimuu, do you want to call him that, too?”

Whoa. I’d gotten an even more embarrassing nickname. Just thinking about Hasebe calling me “Kiyopon” in front of people gave me goosebumps.

“I won’t call him that. It’s embarrassing. I already decided to call him Kiyotaka,” said Yukimura.

In the end, we decided to call one another by our given names. Before long, it felt completely natural.

I looked behind me to check on the person following us.

Were you okay with just listening in, Sakura?

Every time we’d held a study session, Sakura had tailed us. Today, she watched from a slight distance. She probably couldn’t hear everything we said, maybe enough to just barely get the gist of our conversation. The moment this new group formed was probably her last chance to join.

If she didn’t assert herself, then…

“Well, now that we’ve all learned one another’s names, let’s start over. From here on, the four of us will be known as—”

“U-u-um, excuse me!”

CRASH! The trash can next to us rattled. Sakura clambered back to her feet and walked over, tense and nervous.

“Sakura?” The others said her name simultaneously.

“I-I also want to join Ayanokouji-kun’s group!”

Sakura summoned up every last bit of courage she could to force those words out. She was incredibly nervous, her face turning a deep shade of red. She was so flustered that she didn’t notice that her glasses were crooked.

“Do you want to join the group because you’re anxious about the exam? I mean, when you consider your own scores and your partner, it’d be understandable if you were worried, Sakura,” said Keisei. “Personally, I think you should join Horikita’s group. I’m not sure I can tutor too many people. Besides, your situation’s different. You probably

need to work on other subjects."

Sakura tried again. "N-no, it's not that. I just… I genuinely want to join the group!" she answered.

As the saying went, shame committed on a journey could be left behind. Or, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

"Come on. It's fine if Sakura participates. She kinda fits in with the group," said Akito.

"Is letting me join really all right?" she asked.

"I mean, adding one person's not a big deal. Besides, it isn't like you need any qualifications to take part. We're all loners, so I think it's appropriate. Am I wrong?"

"Loners, huh? Well, I guess you're right," I mused. "Keisei, is it okay with you?"

"I have no objections. But I don't want our group to grow any larger than this. Sakura is easy to accept, but if someone annoying joins, I'm done," said Keisei.

"Th-thank you, Miyake-kun… Yukimura-kun…"

The only person left was Haruka. She was usually welcoming, but this time, she didn't have a smile on her face.

"Sorry, Sakura-san, but you haven't convinced me yet," said Haruka.

"Ah…so I-I, uh, I can't…?"

"Well, look. I'm really looking forward to being part of this group. Or, rather, I get the feeling I'm going to enjoy it. So…" Haruka pointed at Sakura. "If you want to join, you have to follow our one big rule. We call each other by our first names, or by nicknames. So, Sakura-san, uh…" Haruka looked at me. "Wait, what's her first name again?"

"Airi," I replied without missing a beat.

"We'll all call you Airi, and you'll use all of our first names. Are you okay with that?"

Sakura wasn't good at dealing with interpersonal relationships. We all knew that, which was why Haruka was testing to see whether she could manage this.

"U-um…"

I tried to help the bewildered Sakura. “Keisei, Akito, and Haruka.”

“K-Keisei-kun, Akito-kun, Haruka…san… Whew…” said Sakura, barely whispering the words.

“There’s no need to use honorifics, right?” Akito said.

“Yeah. As long as you use our first names, that’s good enough. Now, all that’s left is using Kiyopon’s nickname.”

Sakura’s face reddened. A mysterious sound escaped her lips. “Ah-hyuu!”

“You’ve seemed pretty close to Kiyopon for a while now, so calling him that shouldn’t be a stretch, right?” said Haruka. She was merciless.

“Kiyotaka is fine,” I said. Kiyopon was a bridge too far. It was embarrassing even in my head.

“Ki-Kiyo-Kiyo…pyo!”

Everyone focused on Sakura. She hated attention, which made her stammer, which made them pay more attention. It was turning into a vicious cycle.

“I don’t know what kind of effect this group will have on you, but I think it’s good that you’re joining, Sakura. You’ve taken a big step forward. Just one more step can’t hurt,” I told her gently.

“Yeah…K-Kiyotaka-kun. I look forward to studying with you all.” Sakura looked me square in the eye.

“Okay, you passed. I’m in favor of Airi joining us,” said Haruka. With that, Sakura became part of the group. “Come on, Kiyopon, try calling Airi by her first name.”

“Uh…hi, Airi.”

“H-hello!”

Even though we were stiff and nervous, we both managed.

“From now on, we five are the Ayanokouji Group. Looking forward to it!” said Haruka.

Apparently, the group would be named after me whether I liked it or not.

6.4

And so, the Ayanokouji Group (saying it still felt weird) was officially established. We began to make plans together, including Airi. Haruka created a group chat, making it much easier to talk when we weren't physically together. Because we were often alone in our rooms, our chats were lively and long.

After we finish class tomorrow, do you all feel like seeing a movie to take our minds off things? Haruka texted.

Wait, are you talking about that one new movie?

Yeah, yeah, that one. I heard that it comes out tomorrow. Since everyone's studying right now, scoring tickets should be easy!

I suppose that taking a break is a good idea. When you say "you all," I assume I'm invited?

Of course! You're part of the group, Yukimuu. But I guess I did spring this on you guys. If you don't have time, we can wait and go after the test.

Akito hadn't seen these messages yet, but when he did, he'd probably agree to go. I wondered whether I should take the initiative here. Even though I was a little nervous, I replied in the group chat. *I'll join you.*

A message from Airi came only a few seconds later. *I want to go, too.*

All right. If Akito goes, I'll come as well, replied Yukimura.

Akito himself sent a response in a couple minutes. *Sounds good to me. Can you reserve our tickets?*

Sure. I'll collect points from you later. Thanks, everyone!

The group chat quieted down after that. Haruka had probably switched over to her web browser to reserve our seats online.

I'm looking forward to seeing the movie, Airi texted me.

Yeah, me too.

I'm really excited about tomorrow, Kiyotaka-kun. Goodnight. She ended the chat on that especially polite note.

“So, I’m going to the movies with a group, huh?” I muttered to myself.

It seemed I was somehow developing a social life. This’d be normal for anyone else, but I trembled with a kind of excitement I’d never experienced before. I decided I should probably hit the sack early to make sure I wasn’t sluggish tomorrow.

My phone rang, and I answered it. “Seems like you’re awake,” said Horikita.

“It’s still only ten o’clock. Do you need something?”

“The library study groups are just about finished. After tomorrow’s session, I’d like to make some final preparations for the exam. Can you come along with me? If you could tell Yukimura-kun as well, that’d be a big help.”

“Tomorrow, huh?” That was the day I’d just agreed to see a movie.

“If that’s inconvenient, the day after tomorrow is fine. But Thursday is the limit. The questions are almost complete, but I think we need to change some of them.”

“I’ll talk it over with Keisei. Is it okay if we’re late? We should also get in touch with Hirata and Karuizawa ahead of time, if we need to,” I told Horikita.

“Keisei? It seems like you and Yukimura-kun have gotten quite close. You don’t need to worry about the other two. I already talked to them,” said Horikita.

I wasn’t the only one who’d gotten closer to others, evidently. Horikita seemed to have successfully bridged the divide between herself and the students in her study sessions. I’d be delighted if she got on good terms with Hirata and Karuizawa, at the very least.

Just as I hung up, I received another text. Apparently, I was popular tonight. This time the message wasn’t from Airi, though, but from Karuizawa.

I confirmed that a girl was walking around today asking whether people saw how much sugar Hasebe-san puts in her coffee. Apparently, Hasebe puts a ton in, so people had noticed.

Just as I thought. Rather than being incredibly perceptive, Hiyori was quick-witted. She’d pretended to display remarkable powers of

observation to shake us up.

I think that Horikita's going to contact you about tomorrow, but we plan to meet around 8 p.m.

Isn't that pretty late? Karuizawa asked.

I'm busy before that. I'm going to a movie with my study group.

A movie? Are you seeing that new one, by any chance?

Seems like you know it. Anyway, I have a favor I'd like to ask of you.

I gave Karuizawa detailed instructions. Once she finished reading everything, she sent me an irritated reply. *This is another super-annoying errand. What are you even after?*

I'll explain when it's done. It's for your own sake.

Yeah, sure. See ya tomorrow.

I thought that was it from her. However, immediately afterward, I received another message. There wasn't any text, but there was a little sticker. It was a cute strawberry shortcake with a bunch of candles in it.

Happy belated.

That additional message popped up after the cake. Karuizawa didn't text me again.

"She noticed that it was my birthday? But how?"

I hadn't told anyone about my birthday. Then I recalled that our chat app had a field for your birthdate, in addition to the fields for your name and email address. I hadn't chosen to keep that information private.

I'd thought that no one would notice my birthday this year. Karuizawa was the first.

After finishing my conversation with her, I deleted all the texts. Though I hesitated, I also deleted the birthday sticker she sent. Afterward, I accessed Karuizawa's profile and saw that her birthday was March 8.

"Guess I'll remember that."

6.5

Class the next day felt surprisingly long. Maybe that was because I'd gradually begun to look forward to the study sessions with my friends. When school was done, I headed toward the movie theater with Yukimura and the others.

"It kinda feels exciting to go out with everyone…K-Kiyotaka-kun," said Airi, walking next to me. She sounded reserved, but also upbeat. She was like a child, but I felt the same way, so I guess I was childish, too.

"Yeah, it does. It's not a bad feeling."

"Hee hee. Kiyotaka-kun."

"What's up?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You said my name."

"I-I did?! S-sorry, you must've heard wrong!"

I didn't think I'd misheard her. Upon arriving at the Keyaki Mall, we immediately went to the movie theater. Haruka had bought the tickets ahead of time, and she handed them out to us one by one.

"I'm looking forward to this."

"Ayanokouji-kun!" Satou Maya's voice called out to me. Why was she here?

"Hey, are you going to see that movie right now? You know, that one everyone's talking about?!" she asked excitedly. "To tell you the truth, I came here to see it, too. So did Karuizawa-san and the others," she added.

Behind Satou, a crowd of girls approached the theater. "Looks like it," I replied. "Did Karuizawa invite you?"

"Nope. When I mentioned wanting to see a movie after our study group, Karuizawa-san said that she wanted to come, too. So, we all decided to go. Since we're all here, let's see it together!" said Satou, quickly latching on to my arm.

“Huuuh?!” Airi yelped.

“H-hey, knock it off,” I told Satou.

“Huh? Why? This is okay, isn’t it?” she asked. Satou sounded calm and composed, but her face was red. She was trying a little too hard.

“Oh, what a coincidence. Yukimura-kun, Ayanokouji-kun. Oh, and Hasebe-san and Sakura-san, too,” said Karuizawa in a slightly condescending manner.

It wasn’t a coincidence at all. I’d told her last night.

“What an *unpleasant* coincidence. I’m going inside.” Keisei went on ahead by himself, looking rather indignant.

“Well, guess I’ll go, too,” I said.

Separating myself from Satou somewhat forcefully, I followed Keisei inside the theater. It was almost entirely full, and the scent of popcorn and hot dogs tickled my nostrils. We’d reserved the five seats farthest to the back and right. Satou, Karuizawa, and their group had gone to buy popcorn and soda, and hadn’t come in yet.

As I sat down, Airi leaned over and whispered to me. “Um, K-Kiyotaka-kun?”

Since everyone around us was chatting loudly, I didn’t think she needed to speak that softly. “What’s the matter?”

“Well, Kiyotaka-kun, it’s… Recently, you’ve gotten along pretty well with, um, Satou-san, right?” she asked.

Considering what Airi had seen, it wasn’t surprising that she was curious. However, I needed to keep that particular rumor from spreading. “That’s not how it is. Satou and I are exam partners. We’ve been studying together.”

“B-but…p-people don’t normally walk, um, a-arm-in-arm like that, do they?”

“That wasn’t really arm-in-arm. She just grabbed me,” I replied.

“Well, if you dislike it, you could just, um, shake her off,” said Airi.

While timid, Airi’s comeback was correct. I’d passively gone along with Satou.

“I understand. I don’t think there will be a next time.”

“A-also…”

There was more?

“Before we partnered up, you went somewhere with Satou-san alone, didn’t you?” she asked.

I remembered the day Satou had called me over in the classroom. Hadn't Airi watched me?

"I-Is there s-something g-going between you two?"

"No."

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Then again, all Satou did was get my contact information. Besides, Airi and I had also exchanged contact information. It was nothing to feel weird about.

"Not convinced?" I asked.

"N-no, I am. S-sorry. I've been asking you all these strange questions… Did I make you uncomfortable?"

"Not at all. If there's something bothering you, you can ask me any time," I told her.

"I'll keep an eye on you, then, Kiyotaka-kun," she replied. "L-Leave it to me!"

Er, thanks? Not too closely, I hope.

Well, I didn't want to burst Airi's bubble. She looked very confident now.

After that, I enjoyed the movie in peace and quiet. Well, as much as I could. The movie itself was very strange.

6.6

There were many shops in the Keyaki Mall. Most were establishments people frequented daily, like supermarkets, but there were specialty shops as well. For example, there were stations that helped deal with any electric, gas, or water utilities problems you might have, and a delivery service that brought items from the convenience store to your room. There was also a dry cleaner's that a salaryman would probably use frequently, but students at this school didn't need as often. Unless you happened to get a blazer dirty, of course.

It was past eight o'clock on Thursday night, and our test was next week. It was closing time for the shops, so everyone from Class D gathered in a karaoke room. You could hold a meeting there without having to worry about anyone overhearing. Although it probably would have been best to do this in someone's room, none of us wanted to.

"Hey, is it okay if I sing?"

"Wait, Karuizawa-san. We didn't meet here to have fun," said Hirata.

"Even though we came all this way, and there's karaoke right here?"

"We came because *you* said that you didn't want to use the dorms to study."

"Yeah, fine. But, come on, isn't it kinda stupid to go all the way out to a place that has karaoke and not sing?"

"Just enjoy the food and drinks and deal with it," said Horikita. Karuizawa had already put in an order. There was a bunch of junk food on the table, plus the drink she'd gotten for herself.

"Then let's sing a duet together after the meeting's over, Yousuke-kun."

"Sure," said Hirata. "It'll be nice to relax afterward."

"I agree," replied Karuizawa. "I *do* want to make sure we discuss this test, but it's been quite a while since I could do karaoke."

"Okay, I'm going to start," said Horikita, ignoring Karuizawa.

“First, our study sessions. To be perfectly honest, I think the results have been fantastic. The boys were imbeciles at first, so I was worried, but fortunately, they studied hard.”

“It’s like an English dictionary is just flying out of my mouth all the time, dude!” said Sudou.

“Sudou-kun has improved significantly compared to where he started. His concentration, in particular, got better by leaps and bounds. However, Sudou, don’t forget that your basic abilities are still inferior to a first-year junior high school student’s,” said Horikita.

“I studied *this* hard, and I’m still only at a first-year junior high level?” replied Sudou despairingly.

“Considering that you began at an elementary school level, that’s amazing,” said Horikita.

“H-Horikita-san, don’t you think that’s going a little too far?” Hirata asked.

“He didn’t even know that the mathematical constant pi existed until recently,” Horikita countered.

Dang. To think Sudou had lived this long without knowing what pi was.

“Huh? That’s so stupid!” said Karuizawa. Even though Karuizawa wasn’t very studious herself, she was certainly better than that.

“Shut up, Karuizawa. You probably don’t even know it either,” said Sudou.

“No, no, no, I do. Even *I* know pi is 3.14,” said Karuizawa. Our conversation was rapidly devolving. Everyone involved would end up with a headache.

“Please stop.” Yukimura said. “Horikita, is Sudou really going to be okay?”

“Like I said, his fundamental scholastic abilities are low. But if we just focus on the things a first-year, second-semester high school student needs to know, then I think so. He definitely shouldn’t expect to fail this exam. What about you, Yukimura-kun? Did you manage to resolve Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun’s issues?” asked Horikita.

“Of course. Ayanokouji watched everything closely, so he can back me up on that. Right?” Keisei asked me.

“I don’t think there was a better method we could’ve gone with. I’m not worried about anyone,” I replied.

“I’m glad. I’d absolutely hate to lose anybody from Class D,” said Kushida.

“Yeah. But are we really going to do okay?” said Karuizawa. She still seemed unsettled. “Look, I hate the idea of having fewer classmates. But this test always gets someone kicked out, right? So, like, there’s no guarantee Sudou-kun and I won’t fail, right?”

“Well, I can’t guarantee that,” Kushida said. “But…”

“Then don’t act like it’s a done deal.”

The somewhat relaxed atmosphere became tense.

“You know, Kushida-san, I kinda feel as if you’ve been paying us lip service for a while now,” said Karuizawa.

“R-really? But I just want everyone to pass,” said Kushida.

“Man, it sure must be nice. Being smart, I mean. You don’t have any idea what’s gonna happen to me,” snapped Karuizawa.

“It’s okay, Karuizawa-san. You studied hard in your group,” said Hirata.

“Kushida-san, I’ve wanted to say this to you for a while now. Don’t you think you’re taking this goody two-shoes act a bit too far?”

“Uh…r-really?” stammered Kushida.

“Can you please calm down, Karuizawa-san? We’re in the middle of discussing our final exam. Don’t waste our time,” said Horikita.

“Be quiet, Horikita-san. Hey, Kushida-san. Are you making fun of me in your head right now? Thinking about how stupid I am?” asked Karuizawa.

“I wouldn’t do something like that,” said Kushida.

“Then don’t patronize me. Tests are always hard for me, no matter how many I take. Are you going to be responsible if I fail?” asked Karuizawa.

This was getting absurd. Karuizawa’s inexplicable anger baffled not just Kushida, but everyone else. Then, in a move no one saw coming, Karuizawa picked up her glass of grape juice and dumped it over Kushida. The juice soaked into Kushida’s blazer.

“Karuizawa-san!” Hirata grabbed Karuizawa’s hand, which still held the cup. “You can’t do this. That’s not okay.”

“B-but… Are you saying I’m in the wrong here?” asked Karuizawa.

“Yes, Karuizawa-san. Kushida-san hasn’t done anything bad to you,” said Horikita. Even she, locked in a cold war with Kushida, couldn’t defend this.

“I’m fine, really. I don’t mind. Please don’t blame Karuizawa-san, okay?” said Kushida.

“No. Karuizawa is at fault here,” said Keisei.

“Oh, sure. *I’m* the bad guy. Kushida-san is the class’s favorite, after all,” said Karuizawa. She turned toward me, as if I were her last hope. “Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Whose side are you on?”

“Whose side am I on? There are no sides. You’re in the wrong, Karuizawa,” I told her.

“I knew it. Everyone is my enemy,” said Karuizawa. She got up and grabbed her bag.

“Karuizawa-san. If you leave now, you’ll regret it later. I don’t want that,” said Hirata.

“So, what do you want me to do, then?” barked Karuizawa.

“First, apologize to Kushida-san. That’s the most important thing,” said Hirata.

Karuizawa wouldn’t even listen to her supposed boyfriend. She stood her ground. “So, even though I don’t think I did anything wrong, *I* have to apologize?” she asked.

“You have to talk to her,” said Hirata.

Karuizawa stood completely still and silent for a moment. Then, slowly, she spoke. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s completely all right. I should’ve been more understanding of how you felt, Karuizawa-san,” said Kushida. She could have been angry, under the circumstances, but forgiveness came easily from her lips.

Karuizawa looked guilty as she sat back down next to Hirata. “I guess I lost my cool. Sorry,” she said again. Kushida responded with a gracious smile.

“Thank you.” Hirata patted his chest and let out a sigh of relief. However, this didn’t necessarily mean that everything was settled.

“Kushida-san, do you have a spare blazer to wear tomorrow? Will you be okay?” asked Horikita.

“Ah, no. My first blazer got damaged, so this was the only one I had left,” said Kushida.

The school had provided us with two blazers each when we first arrived, but accidents happened, and students could simply outgrow their uniforms. A store in the Keyaki Mall specialized in student uniforms. However, it took time and cost many points to tailor clothing.

“Ain’t there a dry cleaner and a laundromat? I could bring your blazer in with some of my sweaty basketball clothes. If I take them in today, you should get the blazer back first thing tomorrow morning,” said Sudou.

“I didn’t know there was a dry cleaner,” replied Kushida. “That sounds like a good solution.”

“Well, it’s not exactly an apology, but at least let me cover your cleaning fee,” said Karuizawa.

“Really, don’t worry about it,” said Kushida.

“I’d feel too guilty if I didn’t.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Please let me do this much,” said Karuizawa, and so, she paid the fee.

6.7

On the way back to my dorm, I came across Katsuragi standing next to a water fountain. He didn't seem to be looking for anyone in particular, so I called out to him.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Ayanokouji? Oh, nothing. Just thinking a little about the final exam next week," he replied.

"In a place like this?"

"I wanted some time alone to think in peace and quiet," said Katsuragi. "Do you feel like the exam will go well?"

I decided to respond honestly. "Dunno. But everyone's studying really hard."

"Is that so? It would be nice if no one were expelled," said Katsuragi.

I didn't feel as if he was particularly concerned for his classmates. "Did something happen?"

"When you were in junior high, were you ever class representative or on the student council?"

"No, wasn't interested at all," I replied.

"I've been a student council member since elementary school. I even served as student council president in both elementary and junior high. But, after coming to this school, I had to make some significant course corrections," said Katsuragi.

"Come to think of it, you didn't join the student council here."

"I wanted to, but I couldn't get Student Council President Horikita's attention."

So far, this had nothing to do with the final exam.

"At first glance, the student council president and class representatives don't appear to have much authority. Most students think that participating is nothing more than a waste of time and effort. That's why only a few people want to join the council," said Katsuragi.

I shared the majority's feelings on that. I didn't want any management position.

"However, those roles come with certain privileges. There's a divide between people who hold the positions and people who don't—one that can't be crossed. I've lost those privileges," said Katsuragi.

"But your standing in Class A is still good, right?"

"If that were the case, we absolutely wouldn't have chosen Class B as our target for the final exam," he replied.

True, someone like Katsuragi would've picked Class C or Class D. He'd have chosen the path of strong defense and decisive victory.

"Is it okay to talk to me about your class's internal politics?" I asked.

"It's fine. You understand what it's like."

"You know, you should cut yourself some slack. You're trying to singlehandedly carry Class A, but I bet if you relaxed a little, they'd still be fine. The important thing right now is to maintain your position," I told him.

"I suppose. Hmm…to be told to maintain my position by a Class D student who should be chasing after us," he responded, clearly amused.

"Perhaps I can see things objectively precisely because I can't catch up with you."

When the two of us got to the dormitory, we found a crowd in the lobby.

"It's pretty noisy in here. Did something happen?" Katsuragi asked.

"Dunno. Should we try asking around?" I caught sight of the Professor and called to him. "What happened?"

"Oh, Ayanokouji, is that you? It seems that all us first years somehow received the same missive in our mailboxes."

"The same letter?"

I slipped through the crowd, went over to my mailbox, and unlocked it. Others peered over my shoulder as I opened the door.

I took out a letter folded into fourths and walked back to Sotomura.

“Is this…?”

“Yes, it would seem so!”

A few moments later, Katsuragi returned with a similar piece of paper. We unfolded our letters at nearly the same time. They said:

First-year Class B student Ichinose Honami may be collecting points illegally. —Ryuuen Kakeru

Sotomura showed us the same message on his paper. Katsuragi mumbled, “What *is* that guy planning by signing his name to this? If this claim is baseless, the school will take disciplinary action against him.”

“If he’s risking that, does that mean his claim is true?”

“Well, I suppose that this is something I could see Ryuuen doing. If people start to suspect Ichinose of fraud, it’ll make her life difficult, regardless of whether it’s true. What Ryuuen is doing could be considered defamation, but he wouldn’t care about something like that,” Katsuragi explained.

It was true. Ryuuen had no reputation to lose.

“Hey, Ryuuen’s back!” said one student as Ryuuen entered the building. I wondered whether he knew what had caused all the commotion.

“Hey, Ryuuen. What’re you trying to pull?!” One of the Class B guys grabbed him.

“Hmm? What in the world are you talking about?”

“This! Your letter! This nonsense you handed everyone!”

“Oh, that. Pretty interesting stuff, huh?” said Ryuuen.

“What’s so interesting about it?! Look, this is going too far!”

“Fine then, let’s see some proof that Ichinose isn’t collecting points illegally,” Ryuuen replied.

“That’s—”

“How about it, Ichinose?” asked Ryuuen, still holding the letter. He looked at Ichinose, who’d just arrived.

“No matter what I say to you right now, you probably won’t believe me, will you, Ryuuen-kun?”

“That’s right. Besides, it’s up to the school to decide whether

you're doing something wrong."

"I suppose so. Sorry, everyone. But please don't worry. I'll report to the teachers tomorrow and prove that this is just a misunderstanding on Ryuuen-kun's part," said Ichinose proudly.

“How exactly do you plan on proving that, Ichinose?” asked Ryuuen.

“I’ll explain everything in detail. I’ll tell them how many points I have, and how I acquired them. If I do that, will you be satisfied?”

“Report it to the school? Why don’t you prove it right now, in front of all of us?”

“Will you believe me if I just explain it to you, Ryuuen-kun?” Ichinose countered.

“No, I won’t. Spewing lies is probably as easy for you as breathing,” Ryuuen taunted.

“Then it stands to reason that, if I report my total points to the school, there shouldn’t be any room for fraud, right?”

“Heh. I see. I suppose you have a point,” said Ryuuen.

“Are you convinced?!” shouted a Class B student.

“Humans are nasty, lying creatures. Isn’t it possible that Ichinose is coming up with some kind of scheme to hide the evidence right now?” said Ryuuen.

“What is that guy plotting? Even if Ichinose has lots of points, she’s far from the kind of person who’d steal them. Ryuuen has absolutely no chance of succeeding,” said Katsuragi. His expression grew even sterner.

“In that case, what can I do to make you believe me?” Ichinose asked Ryuuen.

“First off, say how many points you have right here and now. Second, explain how you acquired those points. I’ll report that information to the school tomorrow. If you do that, you’ll convince the students who distrust you, right?” said Ryuuen.

“I can’t accept, Ryuuen-kun.”

“So, you admit that you committed fraud?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. It’s precisely because I didn’t obtain my points illegally that I can’t just show you all my cards. If I explain everything to the school tomorrow, they should investigate. On top of that, if I *did* commit fraud, they’d make everything public anyway, right?”

“There’s no guarantee that you’ll report your total points to the school like you say you will.”

“Then go yourself, Ryuuen-kun. Tell them just what you wrote down in this letter,” said Ichinose.

“Really? Heh. Seems like you’re pretty confident.” Ryuuen snickered. It was true. A guilty person might have been nervous, yet Ichinose remained as calm as ever. “Well, I’ll be looking forward to tomorrow.”

Ichinose watched Ryuuen board the elevator with a bold smile on his face.

“Once the seed of doubt is planted, that doubt will grow until it’s eradicated. Even an exemplary student like Ichinose isn’t exempt. The deeper the doubt, the greater the loss of trust,” said Katsuragi.

He was right. The same thing applied to politicians. However high their approval rating, one damaging lie could cost a great deal of support. Once the lie proved entirely groundless, approval ratings might rebound, perhaps even soar higher than ever. But, generally, it was hard to entirely dispel allegations once they spread.

The next day, Ichinose did as she’d said she would. The school issued an official notice that there was no fraudulent activity. They cleared her of all suspicion.

A while back, I’d noticed that Ichinose possessed well over one million personal points. She’d probably accumulated even more by now.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Shiina Hiyori
CLASS:	First Year, Class C
STUDENT ID:	S01T004735
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	Tea Ceremony Club
DATE OF BIRTH:	January 21st

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	A–
INTELLIGENCE:	A–
DECISION MAKING:	E
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	E
COOPERATIVENESS:	D

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

A quiet student. According to reports, she's been solitary since childhood. While she has barely any friends, she also doesn't appear to want any. Even though we don't see any problems with her academics, study habits, or intelligence, we would like her to learn to collaborate with others, build friendships, and improve her ability to communicate.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

I hope to see her cooperation skills improve, but she is an excellent student and approaches her classwork seriously.

Chapter 7:
A Difference in Determination

Time ticked away as we continued to cram for the upcoming exams. Students' spirits dipped under the onslaught of grueling, endless work they had to do. December arrived, and the final exam was less than three days away. Tomorrow, we'd be off for the weekend, the final exam waiting for us on Monday.

To be honest, the exam itself wasn't too dangerous. As far as the Class D students were concerned, we were more united than ever. Even Sudou and the other slackers did their best. The issues were Ryuuen and Kushida.

Ryuuen's two goals were to beat Class D, and to smoke out the puppet master hiding behind Horikita. If he wanted to win in overall points, that limited his tactics. The best he could do was get Class C to study extra hard, or come up with extremely difficult test problems, both of which were relatively ordinary strategies.

I didn't know how fully Class C had united, or if they'd studied extensively. We hadn't seen them in the café, the library, the classrooms, or anywhere else. Was it simple coincidence? Or were the Class C students working somewhere in secret? Even if they did study extra hard, as long as they didn't surpass Class D, we'd be fine. At any rate, though, I had no idea what their strategy was.

"Thinking about something?" asked Horikita.

"Oh, sorry," I replied.

Horikita looked up at me from the base of the stairs. I hurried down after her. She held a large manila envelope stuffed full of the questions she and Hirata had slaved over for the past month. That envelope held Class D's fate, which was exactly why Horikita kept it as confidential as possible. She wouldn't even let me see the questions. Ultimately, she was the only one who knew all of them.

"What are our chances?" I asked.

"Hard to say. Don't expect too much. The school made many adjustments. However, there's no doubt that we've completed the most

difficult part of the exam so far," said Horikita.

She exuded confidence, so she'd probably done a solid job. The issue was what came next. How would we protect these questions?

While making our way to the staff room, Horikita and I bumped into Ryuuen in the hallway.

"Yo, Suzune." Ryuuen wore a bold smile on his face. He also held a manila envelope.

"Is this a coincidence? Or an ambush, perhaps?" asked Horikita.

"It's inevitable. I was waiting for you."

"An ambush, then." Horikita let out an exasperated sigh and walked past Ryuuen.

"You're submitting your test problems at the last minute too, huh? Let's go together," said Ryuuen, holding out his manila envelope. "Anyone might try and sneak a peek at this, so I understand your caution."

"You're not worried about any traitors in your own class?" asked Horikita somewhat mockingly.

"Ha. There's no way anyone would be stupid enough to betray me," said Ryuuen.

"Yet you waited until the last minute to submit your questions," said Horikita.

Ryuuen probably couldn't help but enjoy her ire. Horikita and I walked on, and he followed us.

"I really hope that whatever intelligence you squeezed out of those defective pieces of garbage in your class works in Class C's favor," he said.

Horikita ignored him. "Ayanokouji-kun, have you been studying properly? How are things with you and your partner?" she asked me.

"I think we should be safe," I replied.

"Thinking isn't enough. We can't afford to have a single student drop out. Don't get complacent, even though I'm sure we can handle whatever Class C throws at us," said Horikita.

Ryuuen responded to that verbal jab. "Oh ho! That's an interesting remark. You sound pretty arrogant."

“Hmm, who knows? Maybe it was simply cheap provocation? Just your style,” said Horikita.

“Maybe so,” Ryuuen replied.

As soon as we arrived at the staff room, Horikita called Chabashira-sensei. Similarly, Ryuuen called Sakagami-sensei, who appeared first and took the manila envelope from Ryuuen.

Moments later, Chabashira-sensei showed up and took Sakagami-sensei’s place. She already seemed to know what we were there for, and her gaze focused only on the manila envelope. She paid no attention to Ryuuen, off to the side.

“These are the final questions, Chabashira-sensei,” said Horikita.

“I’ll hold on to them,” said Chabashira-sensei.

Ryuuen watched with a creepy smile. As Chabashira-sensei reached for the envelope, Horikita paused.

“I’d like to ask you one thing, if I may,” Horikita said to Chabashira-sensei.

“Yes?”

“These questions are linked to either Class D’s victory or defeat. They’re two sides of the same coin. We must avoid a leak at all costs. After I hand these papers over to you, could you please not show them to anyone else? Myself included.”

“You want me to turn down absolutely anyone who asks to see them?” Chabashira-sensei asked.

“Would that be a problem?”

“That’s not the issue. I understand that you’re afraid of information leaking, and the school has no right to refuse your request. However, there are conditions,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“Conditions, you say?”

“The entire class needs to agree to this. Has everyone approved this measure?”

“I didn’t receive permission from every individual student, but…I don’t think they’d object. No one wants their class to lose,” said Horikita.

“You can’t say that for sure. Some students *might* very well want

to lose," said Chabashira-sensei.

"That's—"

Chabashira-sensei continued. "On that note, can you guarantee that these are the exam questions your class wishes to use? Not everyone in class saw and agreed to all of them, right?"

"Are you asking me to prove that? You want me to show the questions to everyone in class and confirm that they're okay with them?"

"I'm saying that it's not that simple. I can't be entirely sure that you, Horikita Suzune, are acting for your class's sake. That said, I'll honor your request. If any student asks, I absolutely won't disclose the questions and answers you created," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Thank you very much. Now I can face the exam in peace."

"However, I will say this—generally, it's not ideal to restrict information in this manner. It proves that the class isn't united," said Chabashira-sensei.

"A painful lesson to learn. I'll work harder to bring the class together," answered Horikita confidently.

Chabashira-sensei smiled a bit. "You've changed, Horikita."

"Some things can't stay the same."

"As I said, I'll honor your request. In case of unforeseen circumstances, though, I'd like to add one provision to our arrangement. As long as they have your permission, Horikita, I'll disclose information to those asking to see the questions. Is that okay?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Yes, as long as I'm present at the time," said Horikita.

"Of course. Someone might lie about having your permission, after all. In the event that someone comes looking for the questions, well, I'll tell them everything you said. As a teacher, I can't lie," said Chabashira-sensei.

Horikita breathed a sigh of relief. Something had finally gone right. This plan was foolproof, and should've precluded the possibility of underhanded tricks like the kind we saw in the sports festival. Even if someone tried to pay to see the questions, it wouldn't be allowed.

However, something still felt off to me.

Everything was going smoothly. The test questions that Horikita and Hirata had devised were undoubtedly very difficult, and Horikita had put preventative measures in place to ensure that they didn't leak. Even if Kushida tried to obtain the answers for Ryuuen, she'd need Horikita's presence and approval. Everything was rock solid. No holes anywhere.

Chabashira-sensei solemnly accepted the test questions and motioned for us to leave. Still, Ryuuen's resolute attitude felt off—something about the fact that he didn't seem flustered at all.

"Let's head on back, Ayanokouji-kun. Our business here is finished."

I ignored Horikita and looked into Chabashira-sensei's eyes instead. She stared at me in return.

See it, Horikita. Before it's too late.

I couldn't say anything in front of Ryuuen. Horikita started to walk away, then immediately stopped dead in her tracks.

"Chabashira-sensei. You said that you wouldn't lie, didn't you?"

"That's right. That's required of me, as a teacher," she replied.

"In that case, will the school accept the questions I just submitted to you?"

Horikita had noticed. She'd figured it out herself.

"Not until we confirm that there isn't anything abnormal about them," replied Chabashira-sensei.

"What's the matter, Horikita?" I asked.

Horikita didn't pay any attention to me. "Let me rephrase that. Have you already accepted other test questions?"

Our teacher became quiet. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'd like to hear the answer from your own lips, Chabashira-sensei."

"My response is that the school already accepted and finished reviewing questions from Class D."

Our reality imploded.

"So…does that mean someone else already submitted test questions and answers?" asked Horikita. She couldn't seem to process

what was happening.

“Correct. The school won’t use the questions you just handed me,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“Please cancel acceptance of the previously submitted test questions. I have the correct ones here,” said Horikita, pointing to the manila envelope.

“Unfortunately, Horikita, I already finished reviewing another student’s questions. That student shared similar concerns. They wanted me to keep the questions secret, too. This student said that, in the event that another student selfishly showed up and asked to change the problems, I should merely accept the new questions and hold on to them. They also wanted me to tell them who asked to swap those questions afterward,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“What in the world?” The fight drained out of Horikita, and she slumped over. This was far too cruel. “What student? Please tell me.”

“Kushida Kikyou.”

The answer was obvious. Horikita had thought that she would prevent Kushida’s betrayal. However, Kushida had struck first. Our knowledge of her past made her take bold, drastic measures.

“But under the right circumstances, Class D can change the questions the school already accepted, yes?”

“Yes. However, the deadline is the end of today. If you wish to change the test questions, please bring Kushida here,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“That…”

It was hopeless. Kushida wouldn’t agree to that. Even if we started looking for her now, there was a 100 percent chance that she’d turned her phone off and holed up in her dorm room—or somewhere else, even.

“I can only speculate about which one of you is lying, Horikita. I don’t know the truth. I also acknowledge that an unknown third party might be pulling the strings here. If you don’t resolve this dispute within your class, it’ll be bad,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“How much time do we have left to correct the questions?”

“Until 6 p.m.”

I checked my phone. It was a little before four. We only had about two hours left.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! What are you even doing, Suzune?” Ryuuen sneered. The guy had undoubtedly known about this situation from the very start; he laughed raucously at our despair. “This is already checkmate, don’t you see? The questions that you struggled so hard to come up with are completely meaningless!”

“Were you behind this? Did you instruct Kushida-san to do this?” asked Horikita.

“Hmm, who can say? I mean, it’s not like *I* know anything about Class D, right?”

Horikita raised her voice. “I’m not going to tolerate this outsider eavesdropping on the conversation any further!”

“Oh ho, how scary. Guess I’ll just head back to my dorm like a good boy. I sure am looking forward to the exam’s results,” said Ryuuen.

“Aren’t you going to look for Kushida, Horikita?” Chabashira-sensei asked.

“I dislike futile gestures.” Even if we did manage to find Kushida, there was no way she’d comply. The game was already over. “Did Kushida-san instruct you not to show the questions to anyone?”

“No, I received no such instructions,” said Chabashira-sensei.

“Please show them to me, then.”

Chabashira-sensei showed Horikita the test questions that Kushida submitted. After only a brief glance, one thing became apparent.

“These are incredibly difficult,” Horikita said.

“Yeah. They definitely are,” I replied.

Kushida’s questions didn’t appear any easier than those Horikita and Hirata had prepared. These were excellently constructed problems. In fact, they were so well-structured that you’d never guess that Horikita herself didn’t come up with them. Since Ryuuen was involved, chances were high that Kaneda made them.

If Kushida’s problems had been so easy that even Sudou could have solved them, she would have been suspected of sabotage. These questions made things much, much more complicated. If you knew the

answers ahead of time, it didn't matter how difficult the problems were. As long as all of Class C shared the answers with one another, they would get high scores.

Horikita had promised that she wouldn't expose Kushida's past. Hirata, afraid of internal class conflict, probably wouldn't say anything. That meant that the student who struck first won the day. If Class D lost, Horikita, who'd assumed leadership, would unavoidably take the blame. Kushida would siphon away Horikita's power while simultaneously using Ryuuen to drive her into a corner.

None of this was as dire, however, as Horikita's bet with Kushida. If Kushida and Ryuuen had colluded, there was no doubt that Kushida received Class C's test questions in exchange for her cooperation. If that had happened, Kushida would most likely score a perfect one hundred points on her math exam. If Horikita answered even one question incorrectly, she would have to drop out of school.

"So, is there nothing more to be done?" asked Horikita.

It looked as if she was out of options. This all came down to the naivete of her plans. *If it'd been* me, *then*…

"It's all right, Horikita. Ryuuen left," said Chabashira-sensei to Horikita, who still hung her head. What was going on? Chabashira-sensei didn't look shaken in the least.

"Sorry. I wanted to take extra precautions just in case, so I kept up the act," said Horikita, lifting her head. She didn't look depressed at all.

Then, I understood.

"You knew this was coming?" I asked.

"Yes. I couldn't allow myself to be defeated the same way I was at the sports festival. When the final exam's details were announced, I immediately consulted Chabashira-sensei. I had two requests. One, that I alone submit Class D's usable test questions, and two, that Chabashira-sensei pretend to accept any other questions submitted," said Horikita.

In other words, Horikita had tricked Kushida into thinking that her test questions were accepted.

"Now that they definitely believe that Kushida's test problems were used, if any Class C students aren't studying for the test, they may just fail," said Horikita. I would never have imagined that she'd devise such a wonderful counterattack. I couldn't even have come up with

anything like this myself. Ryuuen had to be completely unaware of the damage Horikita was about to do.

“At any rate, this is a difficult situation,” said Chabashira-sensei, a rare look of genuine concern on her face. “I’ve never had a request like this in all the time I’ve managed Class D. I didn’t expect such caution and deception. However, you won’t always take the day, Horikita. If there are traitors like this among your classmates, you’re doomed to fail.”

Chabashira-sensei was right. Even Class A, currently divided between Sakayanagi’s and Katsuragi’s factions, would never have done something like this.

This meant we needed to be careful in dealing with Kushida.

“I understand. However, this ends with the final exam.” I felt Horikita’s determination.

“Really? In that case, I look forward to it.”

Horikita sighed in relief as she watched Chabashira-sensei go back inside with the manila envelope. Once the two of us were alone, she bowed her head and apologized to me.

“Sorry for keeping quiet about this.”

“No, that’s all right. To be honest, I had no idea.” I’d underestimated Horikita.

“Ryuuen’s knocked me down so many times now. I thought that it was about time I learned,” said Horikita.

This had not only crushed Class C’s decisive victory, it had put Class D a step in the lead. However, Horikita’s final challenge remained.

“All that’s left now is to beat Kushida-san’s exam score.”

7.1

The first part of the final exam was here. The minimum overall score each pair needed to pass was 692 points, which was lower than expected, but we couldn't afford to be careless. The first day covered four subjects: social studies, English, Japanese, and mathematics. That meant that the outcome of Horikita and Kushida's battle would be revealed very soon.

As I walked into the hall on my way to the classroom, I met up with Satou. For better or worse, she seemed to have been waiting for me.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun. It's almost time for the test, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Did you sleep well last night?"

"I studied until about one o'clock. I feel a little nervous," said Satou, putting her hand to her chest and taking a deep breath.

"Well, I can't say it's going to be easy, but let's do our best. You should do well if you just apply everything you've learned," I told her.

"Okay!"

No matter what, we were partners in this. I couldn't deny our shared destiny. If either of us failed, so did the other. Each of us could drag the other into the abyss with them.

"Good morning, Satou-san."

"Oh, good morning, Karuizawa-san."

"Did you already have plans with Ayanokouji-kun? It's rare to see the two of you together," said Karuizawa.

"N-no, we met up by chance."

"Is that so? Well, how about we go get a drink at Pallet before class?" asked Karuizawa.

"Okay. Well, see you later, Ayanokouji-kun," said Satou, turning away bashfully. Karuizawa looked at me for an instant before heading away.

“Those two are close, huh?” I muttered to myself.

“I think Karuizawa-san is a surprisingly jealous person,” Hirata said, walking over.

“Huh?” I said.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning. What did you mean?”

“I’ve pretended to be Karuizawa-san’s boyfriend for a while now. I noticed that she’s been paying more attention to you lately, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“I don’t think that’s right.” Karuizawa had been forced to remove herself from Hirata and attach herself to me, kind of like a remora with a shark.

“Really? Well, I’m glad. I don’t think it’s healthy to be in a fake relationship. That’s probably selfish of me to say, though,” Hirata replied as we made our way to the classroom. “Horikita-san’s questions will definitely sting Class C. I don’t think it should be that difficult for Class D to win, provided that everyone handles the exam well.”

Hirata overflowed with self-confidence. Despite one unforeseen matchup, everything else had gone according to plan.

“To tell you the truth, there was something I wanted to talk to you about, Ayanokouji-kun,” Hirata added. “Do you know Shiina Hiyori-san?”

“She’s in Class C. We met the other day when she showed up at Keisei’s study group,” I replied.

“She came by my study group, too. It seems that Class C is looking for the mastermind hiding in Horikita-san’s shadow.”

“Seems like it.”

“You’re the one pulling Horikita’s strings, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Hirata. It wasn’t a question, just a statement of fact. “I wouldn’t tell anyone else, of course. I’m sure that you have something planned. Besides, you’ve saved Class D many times over.”

“I see. I’m grateful to hear you say that.”

“So, you don’t deny it?”

“Even if I did, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“I suppose I wouldn’t.”

“I’m not some kind of hero. I just don’t want to draw attention,” I told him.

“I assume that you had a reason for what you did at the sports festival. Still, are you okay? Class C is on the offense. If required, I’ve got your back,” said Hirata.

Although I appreciated Hirata’s offer, it wasn’t necessary. “I’m good. I’ll come to you if I need to, though.”

“I understand.”

We arrived at the classroom. I observed Sudou and the other guys from a distance, noticing that they looked quite different from how they had during previous exams. Instead of huddling and cramming in a panic, they calmly used their time to review final details. Nearly half the students were seriously concentrating on the material.

“Quite a difference, huh?” Hirata said.

“Definitely.” If you’d told me months ago that this was what Class D would look like now, I wouldn’t have believed you.

Horikita was reading a book instead of studying. “Are you prepared?”

“You’re reading just before the test?” I asked. “What’re you reading?”

“*And Then There Were None*,” replied Horikita.

“Agatha Christie, huh? Well, let’s hope there’re more than ‘none’ left when this is over,” I joked.

Horikita closed her book and shot down my dark humor. “Nobody is leaving the school. It goes without saying that neither you nor I will disappear, either.”

“The look on your face says that you’re going to win no matter what,” I told her.

“Of course. That’s because I prepared to take first place in our grade this time around,” she replied.

“If the questions Class C set turn out to be really simple, that’s going to be tricky.”

“Even so, I’ll win. That’ll only motivate me more,” she replied.

Well, now I really looked forward to this. *Come on, Horikita. Show me your stuff.*

7.2

As the bell rang to signal that the test was going to begin, everyone started to pack up their study materials. We had to store any and all objects unnecessary for the exam in the lockers at the back of the classroom. The only things we were allowed to have were writing utensils. If our pencils broke, we ran out of lead, or we used our erasers up, we had to request additional supplies from Chabashira-sensei.

"We will now start your final exam. Your first test subject is contemporary Japanese. You are forbidden from turning your papers over before I give you the signal to begin," said Chabashira-sensei.

Rather than have the students at the front of each row pass the test papers back, Chabashira-sensei placed the papers on each student's desk herself.

"The exam will be fifty minutes long. Please try to avoid leaving sick or using the restroom. In the event that you aren't able to wait, please raise your hand and let me know. You won't be allowed to leave the room during the exam for any other reason," she continued.

Chabashira-sensei finished handing out test papers. Not a single student was talking by this point. Everyone focused on their papers. Shortly afterward, the next bell rang, signaling the official start of the exam.

"Begin."

We all flipped our test sheets over at the same time.

If everything went as Keisei had predicted, I thought the countermeasures we'd developed should be enough. I quickly skimmed the questions from start to finish, trying to judge whether my classmates could solve them. It was a cruel lineup, but they weren't impossible. We'd predicted quite a few questions with near-pinpoint accuracy, so if we just stayed calm, we had this. Keisei's plans were right on the money.

Moreover, the school had altered several test questions significantly. I could see traces of where Class C had attempted to trick us, but the school had made edits.

This test would be hardest for Class D's most average students, like Haruka and Akito. They needed to do the best they could and ace the humanities like their lives depended on it.

Horikita, sitting next to me, immediately picked up her pen and answered the first question. I twirled my pen in circles as I meditated on what I should do. Satou had been relatively more enthusiastic than the other students when it came to participating in the study sessions, and I anticipated that she'd score higher than Ike or Yamauchi. However, I needed to complement her score with an appropriate score of my own.

Considering what was to come in future, I decided to aim for a sixty-point baseline. More than that, the important thing was that I wanted to see how Kushida Kikyou reacted to the test.

I raised my head.

So far, Kushida appeared to be checking something as she scanned the test sheet over and over. She stayed still for about two or three minutes. Finally, she started answering questions.

The exam continued in tense silence.

There was a minor incident in the fourth period during the math portion. That section, of course, would decide Horikita and Kushida's competition. The incident happened immediately after we flipped our exams over.

"Why?" squeaked Kushida.

"What's the matter, Kushida?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"N-no, it's nothing. I'm sorry," she replied.

Kushida's audible slipup must have concerned our classmates, but she immediately started answering the questions regardless. Kushida, normally so calm and composed, was in an agitated state we'd never seen before. She was shaken.

Horikita continued working steadily, undistracted by Kushida's unrest. This was a true, fair battle now, powerful in its simplicity.

With my troubles rapidly fading, I concentrated on the exam.

7.3

"Whew." Horikita sighed and quickly glanced up at the classroom ceiling.

"Looks like you're all finished," I said.

"I've never considered studying particularly stressful, but I studied harder for this exam than ever before in my life," she replied.

"What score would you say you got for the math portion?"

"A hundred. Or, at least, that's what I'd like to say. Since there was one part where the question seemed ambiguous, I can probably only say I got ninety-eight points for certain. A few reasonably difficult questions were mixed in."

"It's possible that you might've written something incorrectly or missed an answer, though. Is there a chance that your score is any lower than ninety-eight?" I asked.

"None. I'm certain that I overcame this test. I think I managed to get near-perfect scores in the other three areas as well."

"Well, that's amazing."

"I made this bet with Kushida-san assuming that she'd score a hundred points. I was incredibly thorough in my preparations so I wouldn't suffer even a trivial mistake. Still, it's a shame that I might've missed two points in the end," Horikita continued.

The questions Kaneda had set were by no means easy. I didn't know whether even someone like Keisei had managed to score above ninety. If Horikita had truly gotten ninety-eight points or more, the top spot in our class was hers. Despite tutoring so many students, she'd pushed through thanks to her own willpower and spirit.

"Suzune, there's something I want to tell you. Can I head back to the dorm with you?" asked Sudou. He approached Horikita with his bag in hand, looking somewhat drained.

"Something you want to tell me? Sorry, but can't you just tell me here?"

“About today’s test… I’m not sure if I hit the forty-point mark in every subject. I wanted to apologize. I’m sorry,” said Sudou. He seemed sincere.

“That’s not terrible. Considering what was on the test, you did well,” Horikita said. True, the exam had been more difficult than usual. “I have a little something to take care of, so head on back with your friends.”

“You’re staying, Ayanokouji? Or are you two going back together?” Sudou gave me a skeptical look.

“My business has nothing to do with him. I’m meeting Kushida-san. Is there a problem?” asked Horikita.

“Kushida? Then no, none,” said Sudou. Once he knew Horikita was meeting a girl, he didn’t care. “Well then, I’m gonna head back and study.”

“All right. But, considering what’s coming tomorrow, make sure to go to bed early,” said Horikita.

“I know. Come on, Kanji, Haruki. Let’s go back,” said Sudou.

He didn’t sound perturbed in the least.

“By the way, what are your plans with Kushida?” I asked Horikita.

“It’s not a big deal. Since we can estimate our respective scores, I just want to confirm something with her,” said Horikita.

It would be some time until we received our test results, but I was convinced Horikita Suzune won. That was clear just from looking at Kushida, who got up and quickly left the classroom.

“What’s the matter with her, I wonder?” said Horikita.

“She probably assumes that her score is lower than she expected, don’t you think?”

“I hope so. Ryuuen can be rather tenacious.”

“Are you worried about him?” I asked.

“If he gave her the answers, she likely would’ve gotten a perfect score. If that happened, then you and I would’ve had to drop out.”

“So, if that time came, would you have prostrated yourself before Kushida and begged for forgiveness?” I asked.

“Was that sarcasm?”

“What?”

“Nothing, forget it.”

Horikita pursued Kushida. I decided to follow.

She walked into the hallway and called Kushida’s name. “Kushida-san.”

Kushida slowly came to a stop. “What is it, Horikita-san?” she asked. Fatigue and exhaustion were written on her face.

“Do you have a moment? I’d like to confirm something with you. But there are people around, so how about we go somewhere else?” asked Horikita.

“That depends on what you want to talk about,” said Kushida.

“Ayanokouji-kun will come along, since he’s involved in this matter. You don’t mind, do you?” asked Horikita.

Kushida didn’t answer, but she didn’t refuse, either. She checked the time on her phone and nodded. She had probably arranged to meet someone else afterward.

Since there were still quite a few students left in the school, we decided to head to the special building.

“You want to discuss our bet on the final exam. Right?”

“Yes. Though the results haven’t been announced yet, we should be able to estimate our scores well enough ourselves,” said Horikita. “I’m confident that I scored a ninety-eight or higher. What about you?”

Kushida didn’t look surprised to hear this. Rather, it was like she already knew.

“We don’t have to wait for the official results,” muttered Kushida. “I couldn’t have scored any higher than eighty. No, I probably didn’t even get eighty. You won the bet, Horikita-san.”

“I see.” Horikita seemed slightly puzzled by Kushida’s low score. “I thought you would have scored higher.”

“This is what I am,” said Kushida, sounding disappointed.

“I suppose it won’t be confirmed until the results are official, though.”

“There’s no need for that. You won the bet. Are you satisfied, Horikita-san?”

“So, can I trust that you won’t get in my way from this point on?”

“I’ll keep my promise, no matter how much I hate it. Do you want that in writing?”

“No need. Let’s just start by trusting each other,” said Horikita. She held out her hand.

Kushida stared at Horikita’s outstretched hand, her eyes blank. “I hate you, Horikita-san.”

“I know. But I think I can work hard to change that,” said Horikita.

“I feel like I’m growing to hate you more and more,” said Kushida.

She walked right past Horikita without taking her hand.

“I won’t do anything to impede you. But I’ll never cooperate with you. Don’t forget that,” said Kushida.

“I see. That’s a shame,” said Horikita.

“Remember, Horikita-san, the terms of the bet were that I wouldn’t get in your way. That’s all,” said Kushida. The darkness lingering in her eyes seemed to latch on to me.

“That’s—”

Kushida left immediately. It was as if she didn’t want to face Horikita for even one more second. She no longer had her sights on Horikita, but it might be my turn next. There hadn’t been anything in the bet’s terms about leaving me alone.

“I should’ve thought this through more carefully,” said Horikita.

Kushida wouldn’t keep her promise forever. Our presence destroyed her hope for a peaceful future. The most I could expect for the time being was a temporary ceasefire.

7.4

After Horikita headed back to the dorm, I thought about what was to come. Ryuuen Kakeru wasn't the type to leave unfinished business. Horikita had certainly handled things well this time around, containing Ryuuen and manipulating Kushida with a preemptive strike. In a healthy class, her strategy probably wouldn't have been very useful, but it was effective for dealing with a traitor.

My phone vibrated.

What are you planning? the message read.

I wasn't the only schemer here. *You're planning something too, aren't you, Ryuuen?*

Another message showed up. *I'm definitely going to make you pay.*

An image file was attached to the last message. When I opened it, I found a single photograph that spoke a thousand words.

"So, Manabe and her friends spilled the beans, huh?" I muttered.

Of course, I'd known that when I ran into Ryuuen and Hiyori. Ryuuen had probably threatened the girls to reveal who might've seen them attack Karuizawa, and now my name and Keisei's name were running through his mind. However, he had no evidence. That was why he was trying to corner me. That was what he was thinking by sending me *this* photograph.

The fact that Ryuuen had the photo meant that he knew the circumstances surrounding it. Depending how things played out, Ryuuen would probably go after the person in the picture. If anything, this was a declaration of war.

Did he enjoy the hunt that much? Enough. I was fed up with his obsessive persistence.

I closed my phone and steeled myself. Half-measures wouldn't do here. If Ryuuen was dead serious about picking a fight, I'd return the favor in kind.

"Come at me with everything you've got. I'll play your game," I said aloud.

Despite myself, I couldn’t help but feel a little excited.

7.5

"You're late, Kikyou. What, couldn't slip past your classmates?" asked Ryuuen.

"What are you plotting, Ryuuen-kun?" Kushida demanded. She drew closer to Ryuuen on the isolated rooftop.

"Huh?" said Ryuuen.

"The questions and answers you gave me were completely different than the ones on the exam."

"Oh, yeah. I switched 'em out before the deadline. What about it?" Ryuuen snorted derisively, then took a sip of bottled water.

"I told you, didn't I? I *will* get Horikita expelled, no matter what. I betrayed my classmates and switched out our questions on the condition that you gave me the math test answers. If you kept your promise, Horikita

would've dropped out of school. But you betrayed me," said Kushida.

"What? You mad about something so trivial?"

"Trivial? You want to win against Class D and give us nothing in return?"

"You're mistaken, Kikyou. Your questions weren't used on the exam," replied Ryuuen.

"Huh? What are you even talking about? I turned them in right away, just as you instructed me to. I even confirmed everything with Chabashira-sensei."

"You really haven't noticed? Suzune acted ahead of time to stop the school from formally accepting your questions. Thanks to that, not only did we lose, we just barely avoided catastrophe. Everyone in my class depended on that strategy," said Ryuuen.

"Wait. Ahead of time? That's… No way."

"Go ahead and wait for the results if you doubt me. In all likelihood, Class C lost to Class D. That rendered our agreement invalid.

I'm not giving you the correct test questions if I get nothing in return," said
Ryuuen.

"Grrr!"

"How about showing me some gratitude instead?"

"Gratitude? I just lost to Horikita! What should I be grateful for?!" Kushida recalled the humiliation she'd felt at admitting defeat in front of Horikita. She was so enraged that she felt her blood boiling.

"So trusting, to get snared without even knowing it," taunted Ryuuen. Grabbing Kushida's uniform, he forcefully unfastened a button on her blazer and reached inside.

"Hey, what are you doing?!" shouted Kushida, backing away to put some distance between herself and Ryuuen. Ryuuen smiled.

"Come on. I'm not doing anything. Go ahead, look in your pocket," he said.

"In my pocket?" Still on her guard, Kushida slowly reached into her blazer. She felt paper, which she didn't expect. "What is this?"

Ryuuen couldn't have had enough time to put something in her pocket just then. That meant he'd placed the paper there beforehand. When Kushida unfolded it, she found a list of questions and answers for the math test.

However, they weren't the questions that were actually on the exam in the end. They were the ones Ryuuen had supposedly given her.

"Why were these in my uniform?"

"That's probably not all there is. I assume that several pieces of evidence of cheating are scattered throughout your belongings. I'm sure you'll see them if you go digging later," said Ryuuen.

"I don't understand," said Kushida.

"Someone in Class D was prepared to go in for the kill. What if I *had* still given you the right questions? Come on. Say you scored really high on the exam and then someone accused you of cheating, and they found those papers? What do you think would happen then?"

"Wait, you mean I'd be expelled?! Even though I didn't cheat? That's stupid!" Kushida balked.

"If you were innocent, it *would* be stupid. But you got your hands

on the questions beforehand by working with me. There'd be nothing you could do about it," said Ryuuen.

Of course, Kushida could have claimed she was framed. Even if she pulled through, however, it would've tainted her reputation. It wasn't against the rules for someone to offer their class's questions to another class, but it *was* considered disgraceful. That probably would've invalidated Kushida's test results and threatened her position in Class D, even if she avoided expulsion. Class C would have been in grave danger, too.

"When did this cheat sheet get in my—?"

"You really don't have any clue? Have you noticed any strange people around?"

"No way, it can't… No, wait. I went to our final test meeting at a karaoke room last week with Horikita and the others. A girl got angry and poured her juice on me. Afterward, she asked if she could take my blazer to the cleaners. It was understandable, given that situation, but… for some reason, it keeps nagging at me," said Kushida.

"Let me guess who that girl was. Karuizawa Kei," said Ryuuen.

"H-how did you know? Don't tell me you saw?"

"How could I have seen? It's simple deduction," said Ryuuen. He tapped his finger against the side of his head. "Explain what happened from the beginning."

Though Kushida felt disoriented, she told Ryuuen everything. She explained that Horikita and Hirata had invited everyone, and that Ayanokouji, Sudou, and Karuizawa all sat together. In the middle of their meeting, Karuizawa started a fight and poured juice on her.

After quietly listening, Ryuuen took his deduction a step further. "No doubt in my mind. Someone set a trap for you."

"That's not possible. It's true that my blazer went to the cleaners, but I checked my pockets when I got it back. Besides, the clerk would've told me if there was something inside it!"

"That's not what Karuizawa was going for. Did someone want to know whether you had a spare uniform?"

"A spare? That's impossible," said Kushida.

"What makes you say that with such certainty?"

“Are you trying to say that everyone there set a trap for me, and I couldn’t see right through it? I’m not an idiot. I observe everyone’s behavior. If they were lying to me, I definitely would’ve noticed.”

“Well, you’re probably right about that. However, only one or two people at most lied to you,” said Ryuuen.

“Huh? How would—”

“If someone there read the situation perfectly, then it’s likely that person deceived you. Someone who could figure out everyone’s thought processes, behavioral tics, and habits. Someone who guessed what kind of remarks they’d make. Someone who could read all those things perfectly. Someone who wrote the script, so that you’d act your part in their play,” said Ryuuen.

Kushida denied it, but then thought back on what had happened. Hirata was consistently a pacifist. He would worry about Kushida’s blazer being stained, and would want to placate Karuizawa’s unreasonable anger. And, because the meeting took place right before the test, he would definitely ask how many blazers Kushida had.

“Once they learned that you had one blazer, the only thing left to do was plant the cheat sheet on you during gym class. The real question is, who came up with the idea? It wasn’t Suzune or Karuizawa. They aren’t the kind of girls who could do something like that,” said Ryuuen.

“So, you’re saying I was tricked? By who?”

“Shortly before the test, a letter accusing Ichinose of doing something illegal went out, right?”

“Yeah, the letter you tried to trap her with, Ryuuen. Why did you do that?”

“It was part of the mastermind’s strategy,” said Ryuuen.

“Huh?”

“I wasn’t the one who sent that letter. The person from Class D who set you up did it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you really think I’d put a letter accusing Ichinose of fraud in every single first-year student’s mailbox and deliberately add my own name to it? Well, putting my own personality aside, it was only natural that everyone thought that I did it,” said Ryuuen.

“If it wasn’t you, then you should’ve just denied it.”

“Do you really think I would do that?”

“No.” Kushida understood immediately. Ryuuen tended to pursue things that excited him. If someone sent out letters and put Ryuuen’s name on them, Ryuuen would find it tantalizing. Furthermore, because he hadn’t heard any rumors of Ichinose’s supposed fraudulent activities before, he’d be tempted to learn more.

Then why had someone deliberately put down Ryuuen’s name as the sender? Because an anonymous message had less credibility.

“But what was the letter’s point? To put you on your guard?” said Kushida.

“Who knows? I’ve thought about it at length, but it’s still unclear. Did the culprit simply want to know whether Ichinose had a lot of points? Or maybe… No, that’s impossible. Couldn’t be something that stupid,” said Ryuuen. Whatever he’d considered was just far too removed from reality.

Either way, the strategy had been well prepared and flawlessly executed. Ryuuen’s interest in the person he called “X” had only increased.

“Hey, Kikyou. I don’t know anything about your past, and I’m not interested. However, if you keep trying to get Horikita kicked out of school, you’re going to disappear. Get it?”

“You’re in a dangerous position yourself, aren’t you? If Class C loses collective points for this exam, isn’t that bad?”

“Yep. With this stroke of luck, your class probably has a chance of being promoted to C,” said Ryuuen.

“How does it feel to be knocked down a peg by the ‘defectives’ in Class D?”

“I feel like I don’t have a care in the world right now. Whether it’s Class A or D, we’re only scratching the surface of our battle,” said Ryuuen.

“What do you mean?”

Of course, Ryuuen couldn’t answer her. However, his objective hadn’t changed one bit since he’d started at the school. While there had been moments when he stumbled, his preparations to reach Class A

were still progressing smoothly.

"Do your absolute best," said Ryuuen, turning and starting to walk away.

"Wait—the cheat sheet! Something's not right here!"

"Heh."

"What's this all about? Tell me, Ryuuen!"

"You noticed?"

"Why did someone in Class D have these test questions? Only you and I should have them."

"Because I gave them to X, I suppose," said Ryuuen.

"So, you betrayed me?"

"No. It was a necessary deal."

Ryuuen's eyes lowered to his cell phone. On it were pictures of the questions and answers before he'd changed them. He had sent those pictures to an unidentified email address.

"However, X understands me very well," he added.

He'd received a message from X with the word *"Transaction"* in the subject line. The message read as follows: *Provide me with the questions and answers that Class C devised for our final exam, or make significant changes to the questions you gave Kushida Kikyou.*

Normally, Ryuuen wouldn't dignify that with a response. However, moments earlier, X had freely given him information beneficial to Class C with no strings attached, by warning him that Horikita Suzune had seen through Ryuuen's plans and taken preemptive action to get her questions approved instead of Kushida's. That had come as quite the shock to Ryuuen, whose whole strategy depended on the questions he thought Kushida had submitted. Without X's warning, the Class C students who didn't study enough might've failed.

Knowing that, Ryuuen had had three options.

The first was to defy X and give Kushida the correct questions for the math test, letting her win her bet against Horikita. However, Ryuuen wanted to avoid Horikita being expelled at all costs.

The second was to leave the test questions as they were and let Kushida's cheating be exposed, so she'd get kicked out of school.

However, Ryuuen didn't want to give X *exactly* what he wanted. Playing into X's ideal scenario was no fun.

The final option, and the one Ryuuen eventually chose, was to give Kushida the wrong questions and let Horikita win.

"So, X protected Suzune while managing to keep you in check, Kikyou," said Ryuuen. When he'd realized that X turned his strategy to use Kushida against him, he'd barely held back his laughter. "But I'm about to drive him into a corner. If he doesn't reveal his identity—"

Ryuuen pulled up an image on his phone—the same image he'd sent the mysterious mastermind. The person in the photograph would be instrumental to discovering X's identity.

"Then I'm going to destroy her."

Postscript

Well, that's all for Volume 6.

Syougo Kinugasa here. Lately, I've been pretty worried about an epidermoid cyst on my body, which has grown to about the size of a golf ball. Scary.

Next up, the seventh volume of *Classroom of the Elite*. The sixth volume was a kind of calm before the storm, giving me a chance to explore each character's internal changes. The seventh volume will greatly advance the story. It will include things like a look into Ayanokouji Kiyotaka's past, and a decisive battle with a certain enemy.

And then…yes, there will be an anime adaptation of *Classroom*. That's thanks to all of you, and you have my utmost gratitude. Tomoseshunsaku-sama and I are both overjoyed, especially since we recently celebrated ten years of (metaphorically) licking each other's wounds. I'll definitely have the seventh volume out by the time the anime starts broadcasting! (I've never had a confident declaration like that go well for me, but there's a first time for everything.)

Including the editors, publishers, anime producers, and everyone else, a lot of people are involved with this project now, and I'll do my absolute best to ensure that their efforts aren't wasted. Again, thank you. I'm looking forward to working with you all.

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